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By Frank C. Robertson

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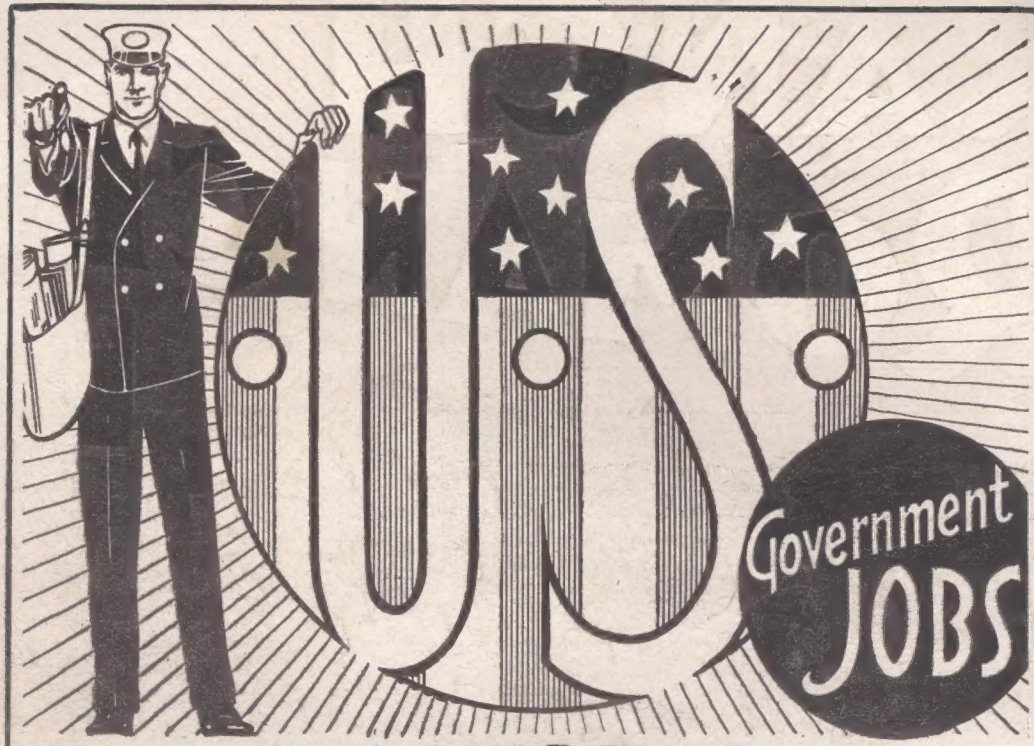
By ELSA BARKER

Western Movie News



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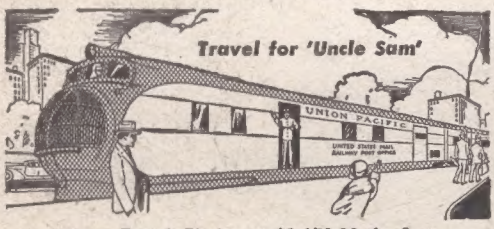

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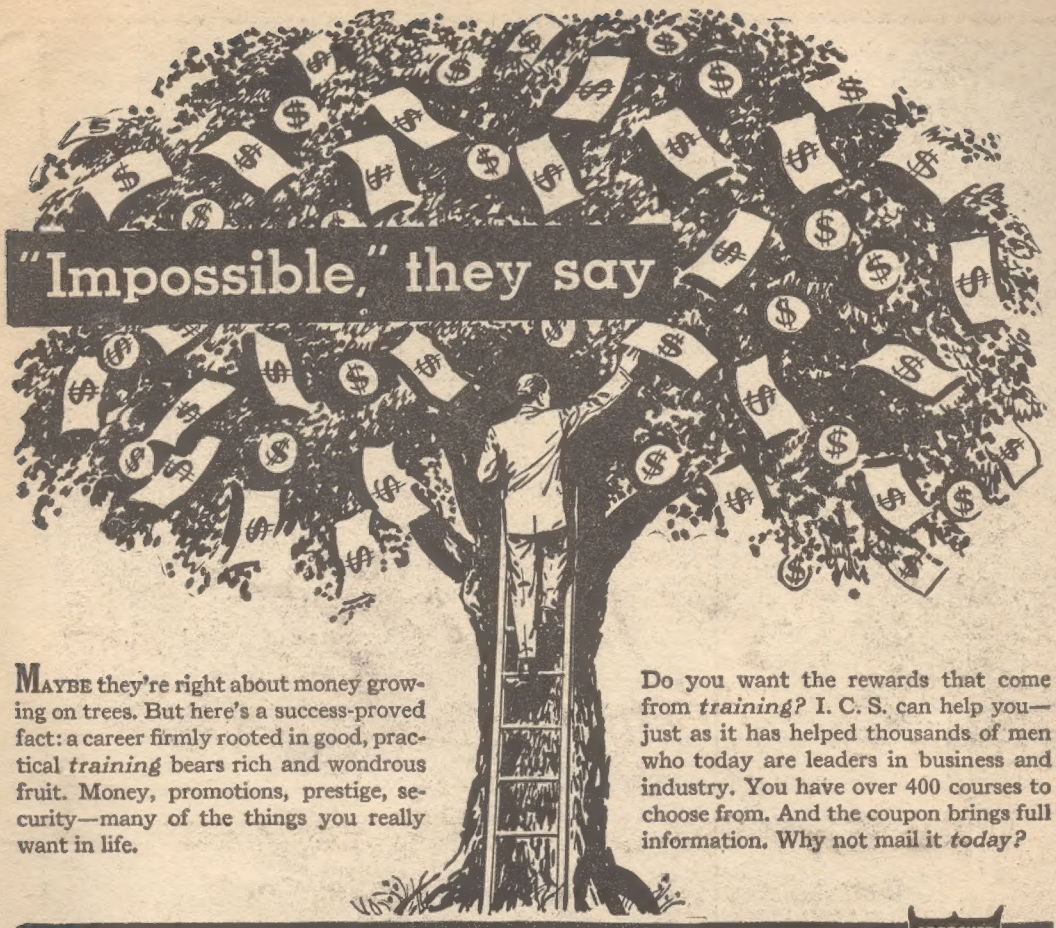

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FIRST
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February 2, 1951
Volume 163, Number 2

RANCH ROMANCES

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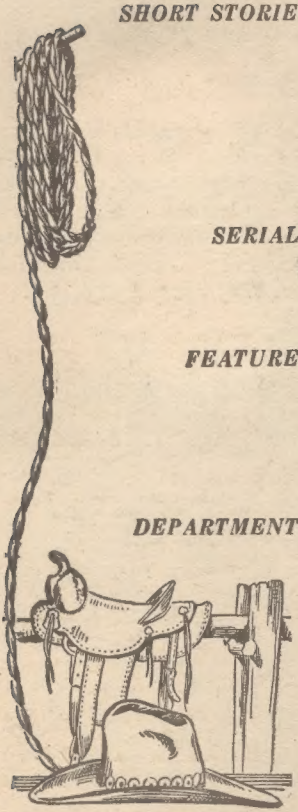

FANNY ELLSWORTH
Editor

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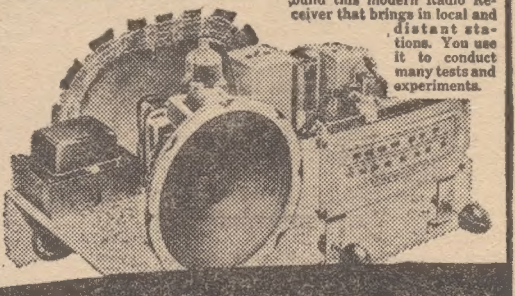

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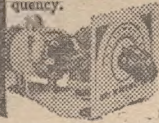

I TRAINED THESE MEN AT HOME

"My first job was operator with KDLR, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. Am now Chief Engineer, WQOX." —T. S. Norton, Hamilton, O.

"I received my 2nd Class Radiotelegraph License and worked on ships. Now with Station WEAN as control operator." —R. Arnold, Rumford, R. I.

"Today I am considered an expert Radio – Television Technician. Have 4 employees. Radio repair business has doubled." —P. G. Miller, Toledo, Ohio.

"N. R. I. has been my stepping stone from a few hundred dollars to over $4,000 a year as a Radio Engineer." —A. B. Michaels, Trenton, Georgia.

"Two months after starting, took a part-time job. Now working full time. Make $200 a month plus commission on servicing." —L. McNiel, Rockdale, Texas.

"While learning, made $5, $10 a week in spare time. Now have spare-time shop at home and earn up to $25 a week." —Leander Arnold, Pontiac, Michigan.

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Will Exchange Snaps

Dear Editor:

Here's hoping I can hear from some of the young people out West. I read RANCH ROMANCES regularly, and enjoy the stories. I have blond hair, blue eyes, and I am 15 years of age. I weigh 110 lbs and am 5'6" tall. I would like to exchange snapshots with anyone who will write.

LOUISE CLABOUGH

Route 2, Box 112
Farmville, Va.

Plays The Spanish Guitar

Dear Editor:

Guess I'll try and get in OUR AIR MAIL. I sure hope I make it. I am a girl of 20 years of age, stand 5'5" tall and weigh 133 lbs. I have dark brown hair and blue eyes. I sing and play the Spanish guitar and mandolin a little. My hobbies are collecting Western and hillbilly music, and pictures of my favorite Western stars, Tim Holt and Richard Martin, and exchanging snapshots. So come on, everyone, and write to me.

KATHLEEN DRAPER

10009 Taymouth Drive
Montrose, Mich.

Farm Girl

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely farm girl who would like very much to get some pen pals. I am 17 years old, 120 lbs, and am 5'3" tall. I have brown hair and blue eyes. I enjoy all sports, especially dancing. One of my hobbies is writing letters. So drop a few lines my way. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots.

WILMA CHAPLIN

R. R. #1
Hillsboro, Ill.

Bad Tempered

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely country girl, 14 years of age. I have light brown hair and blue eyes. I weigh 90 lbs. I also have a bad temper, but don't let that scare you away as I can control it. Please, won't you write to me? I promise to answer all letters I can.

SHIRLEY HARLIN

Route #4
Sullivan, Ill.

Convalescent

Dear Editor:

This is my second request to be placed on your list, and I hope you will publish my letter as I am convalescing from a broken hip. I am 60 years old, a widower for three years and all alone. I am 5'10" tall, weigh 185 lbs., and have a good personality. I have traveled much and have a good education. Come on, old maids and widows, cheer me up. I'll answer all letters promptly.

D. W. PROCTOR

P. O. Box 816
Bartono, Fla.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 26 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Interested In Music

Dear Editor:

This is my fourth letter to you, and I am praying that you will print it. Since I am the only child in my family I get quite lonesome. I am a 17-year-old boy and will be a senior in high school in the fall. I am 5'11" tall and weigh 140 lbs. I have brown hair and brown eyes. I am the drum major of the high school band and I play an E flat alto horn. I am interested in music, books, dancing, dramatics, history and like to have pen pals. I would like to hear from both boys and girls. I will answer all letters I receive and I will exchange snaps with those who want to.

RICHARD E. WILSON, JR.

Forest, Ohio

Cowboy From Brooklyn

Dear Editor:

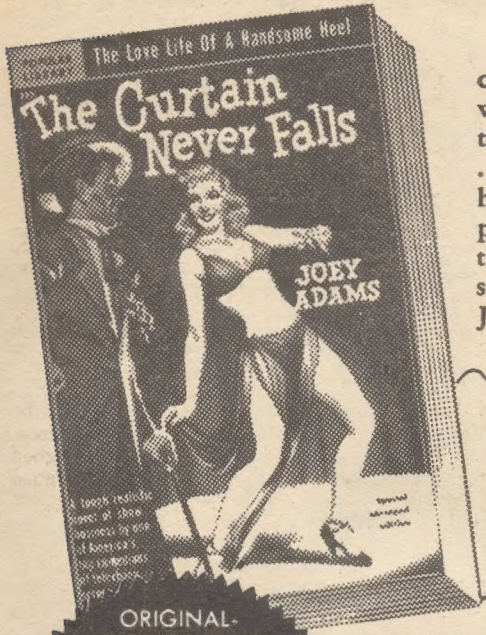
I'm a sort of frustrated cowboy from the wilds of Brooklyn. I'm fenced in the city, and don't know how to get some of that fresh, clear air except through correspondence. I'm 22 years old, 5'8" tall, wide shouldered, fair and have brown hair and brown eyes. I happen to like practically everything. How's about it, you cowboys and cowgirls, let me hear from you.

HAL BROWNE

c/o Strauss
1610 43rd St.
Brooklyn, N. Y.

HE RUINED A WOMAN'S LIFE!

DID FAME GIVE HIM THE RIGHT TO DO THIS?



We all know characters like Jackie, the comedian . . . ruthless, ambitious, not caring whom he steps on — just so he comes out on top. Love to Jackie was just lust and passion . . . and he never even waited long enough to hear the broken hearts crack. No punches are pulled in this fast-paced story about Jackie, the man who's on-stage all the time — and up-stage at that! Don't miss finding out why, for Jackie, the curtain never falls!

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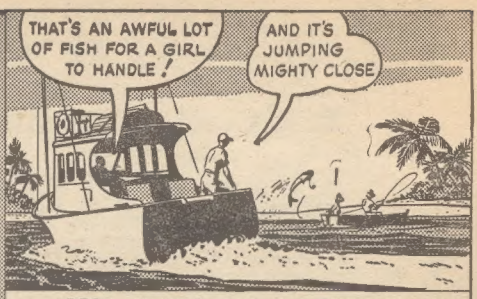
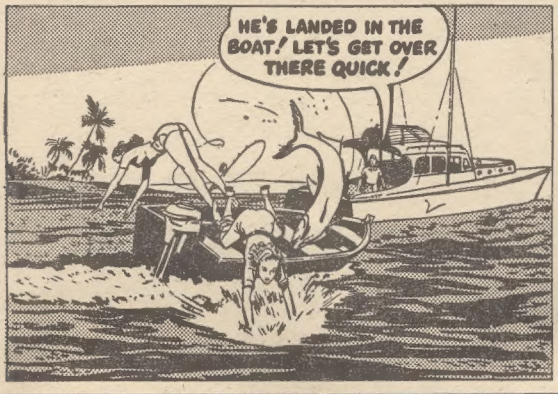


JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN . . .



PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"
WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA

SAY, THIS BLADE'S A HONEY! I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE
LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN

THIN GILLETTES GIVE THE BEST-LOOKING, MOST COMFORTABLE SHAVES YOU EVER HAD WITH A LOW-PRICE BLADE. UNIFORMLY KEEN AND LONG LASTING, THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A "T" AND PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE HANDY 10-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT
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TRAIL DUST

THIS DEPARTMENT will endeavor to cut sign on some of the colorful happenings of today's West and haze the stuff along to you—twentieth century trail dust, stirred up by folks in the cow country.

OUT IN SANTA PAULA, California, a man wearing a red jacket and a straw hat and riding a white horse was mistaken for a deer by a hunter and shot through the ear. There has been no report of deer wearing this costume during the hunting season.

IN GLACIER PARK, Montana, signs wax poetical in warning visitors about the bears. Such as:

"Highway bears are often rude:
They eat fingers as well as food."

When asked what he thought of the signs a bear said, "Beats Keats."

A LETTER WAS received by a radio station in Denver written in childish handwriting: "Dear Sir: I stoll about eleven cents worth of things from your ladie's restroom several months ago. It's been bothering my mind. Sorry. So I enclose the amount I stoll." There was a penny and a dime in the letter. The money did not sponsor a new program.

IN MONROVIA, California, the desk sergeant on duty picked up the phone. "Junior is missing," an excited feminine voice said. "We've got to find him before somebody kills him." With visions of "Junior" being something super in the way of annoying little boys, the sergeant asked a question. "What makes you think Junior might be killed?"

"A stranger wouldn't know he's odorless and friendly," said the lady on the wire. "He's our pet skunk."

Whether the police were baffled because they couldn't take up the scent isn't known.

STRANGE THINGS ARE sometimes written in guest books. In the Carbon County museum in Wyoming was found written in a girl's handwriting: "Life is very uninteresting because I like a boy who doesn't like me." Fortunately romance isn't always something found in a museum.

OUT IN PROVO, UTAH, John Dimitt proved that he and his car were really tough. The car crashed into the side of a moving freight train and knocked six box cars off the track. Dimitt was slightly injured. The railroad was amazed.

A FATHER IN BISMARCK, North Dakota, received a wire from the police in Long Beach, California, informing him that his son had been picked up as a runaway. The wire asked for the boy's age and suggested disposition of the case. The boy's father wired back giving the birth date of the son and stating, "Rather calm and easy-going disposition."

RANCH FLICKER TALK

FRENCHIE

A LIVELY Western that was fun to shoot and is fun to see— with Shelley Winters, Joel McCrea

---

I TOOK a very dim view of playing in horse operas," said Shelley Winters, "and after being in two of them my view is not much brighter. You have to ride horses, or get spilled out of buckboards. In *Frenchie* I had a knock-down, drag-out fight with another woman—which is much more dangerous than a fight with a man. And on top of all that, I never got kissed!"

There was a twinkle in her eye when she said all this, though, and when you see *Frenchie,* you'll know Shelley had the time of her life playing it—clinch or no.

She plays a lady gambler out to get three men—two for revenge and one for love. She took lessons in how to handle the pasteboards but none in how to hunt down the men. Ever since her first smashing success as the waitress in *A Double Life,* Shelley has had plenty of movie experience in getting her man.

As for getting her woman—well, the battle royal between Shelley and Marie Windsor in *Frenchie* ends by the two girls being pulled apart forcibly, considerably the worse for wear. The scrap takes only a minute or two on the screen, but shooting it took 67 minutes of clawing, biting and scratching and rolling on the floor. The studio, Universal-International, claims that's a record length for shooting any fight scene, male or female.

The director, Louis King, briefed the girls beforehand by telling them that anything went, except the common fistic punch usually swung by men.

The two girls hadn't exactly gone into training for the fight, but they were both well prepared, having spent hours looking at famous female battles on film, notably the wild fracas between Marlene Dietrich and Una Merkel in *Destry Rides Again.*

Marie and Shelley picked up plenty of pointers and added a few original touches of their own. The result is a lulu of a scrimmage, and when you see how they look after the battle, don't give the credit to make-up. Just remember that women are

Shelley and Joel

The gambling lady (Shelley Winters) in Universal International's newest

notoriously unable to pull their punches and that these gals were at it for over an hour. As for how they felt—well, that was all the movie making they did that day.

The lucky man being fought over is Joel McCrea, who has no complaints whatsoever about being in Westerns, even without clinches. He's a cattleman at heart, and he figures audiences know he's the real thing.

He always has a fine time on location, even though his beautiful wife, Frances Dee, never goes along with him. In fact, she hasn't visited his set in ten years. Being an actress herself, Frances has strong ideas about every detail of movie making.

"She always wants to know who on earth picked out that horrible shirt I'm wearing," Joel said. "Of course, in a Western you can't change your shirt in mid-picture, so I worry about it all the rest of the film."

Frances made up for her absence by satisfying Joel's passion for licorice. A two-pound box arrived every Monday morning, and soon the whole cast was looking a little blackish around the lips.

Joel's big project off the set was song-plugging. His cook had written a number called *I'm Through Sayin' I'm Through,* and no visiting producer or musician was safe from Joel's rendition of same.

Frenchie was made near Bishop, Calif., at the base of the High Sierras. Shelley says that she had a much better time on location than she expected to. She rode her first horse at a dude ranch nearby and caught, cooked and ate her first trout.

When she was relating, breathlessly as usual, these experiences to Joel, he said with a grin, "Gosh, Shelley, isn't that enough excitement for a girl? Do you really want to get kissed *besides?*"

BETH BRIGHT

Columbia Pictures

Rod Cameron has found the recipe for getting along in Hollywood

"I Ran Away From Hollywood,"

says

ROD CAMERON

RUGGED Rod Cameron, who's six foot four with muscles to match, was once turned down by the Canadian Mounties because he didn't measure up to physical requirements. He had some disability so minor he's forgotten what it was. Anyway, the Calgary, Alta., young man decided to go East to seek his fortune, and he looked around for the toughest job he could find to prove he was robust.

He proved it as a sandhog burrowing a tunnel under the Hudson River, and then, figuring he was strong enough to cope with the West, he headed for California.

You take a guy that big and that handsome around Hollywood, and somebody's sure to suggest he ought to be in the movies. There was a friend of Rod's who was in a position to make that recommendation come true. He got Rod a part in a Bette Davis movie, *The Old Maid,* but even if you saw it, you didn't see Rod. He was just another face on the cutting room floor.

By this time the dogged Cameron got just as obstinate about proving he could be a movie actor as he had been about proving he was tough.

After being Fred MacMurray's standin, and then having bigger and better supporting rôles, Rod became a Western star. Big parts came to him so fast he seldom had even a couple of days off.

Right then, believe it or not, was when Rod's difficulties began.

"The more jobs I got, the more I'd worry about how long good times were going to last for me. No matter how many contracts you've signed, you never get to the point in Hollywood where you can sit back and say, 'This is it. I've arrived!' "

There wasn't a grey hair in his brown curly crop and his shoulders were just as square as ever, but Rod began to feel like an old man. He says he'd get out of bed in the morning and groan, "Oh, gosh, another day at the studio!" and he'd wish he could get away from Hollywood.

"One morning I said to myself: 'Look here, Cameron, what are you aiming to be? The richest man in boothill? Do you figure you can play all the Western parts in Hollywood?'

"That's just what it looked like I was trying to do," admits Rod with a grin. "So I decided it was time to start living. I finished the movie I was making then, and took off for South America and wandered around long enough to get Hollywood out of my system, and then—wouldn't you know—I got itching to go to work again. I went back to the studios, hat in hand meek as any cowpoke after a Saturday night blow-out, and I got three fat parts."

Then Rod knew he had the recipe for a long and happy life in Hollywood. When he'd finished those three pictures he turned down all other offers and took off in a trading schooner for the South Seas.

When he came back he made his current release, *Stage to Tucson,* for Columbia, and then *Short Grass,* a Tom W. Blackburn story, being issued by Allied Artists.

Last summer he went back to his home town for some rodeoing, was presented with a scalping bonnet and made an honorary chief of the Piegan Indian tribe. Next he thinks he'll wander around Europe.

As for romance—since Rod loves music, dancing and picnics, he makes a wonderful date; but so far he's steering clear of anything more permanent.

A RANCHER DOESN'T expect to find a pretty girl sitting on a rock out on the range, nor to learn that she is accused of a cold-blooded murder

---

GEORGE KENDRICK wondered why he had ever become a sheepman. For three hours he and his young Mexican herder, Juan Batista, had been balked by a mountain stream six inches in depth. Not a single cud-chewing ewe would wet her dainty tootsies, and if dragged forcibly over to the other side they were back before the man could say baaa.

There they were, those in front milling to get back while the ones in the rear leap-frogged over the backs of the others to escape the nips of Juan's sheep dog. They were willing to move every way except forward.

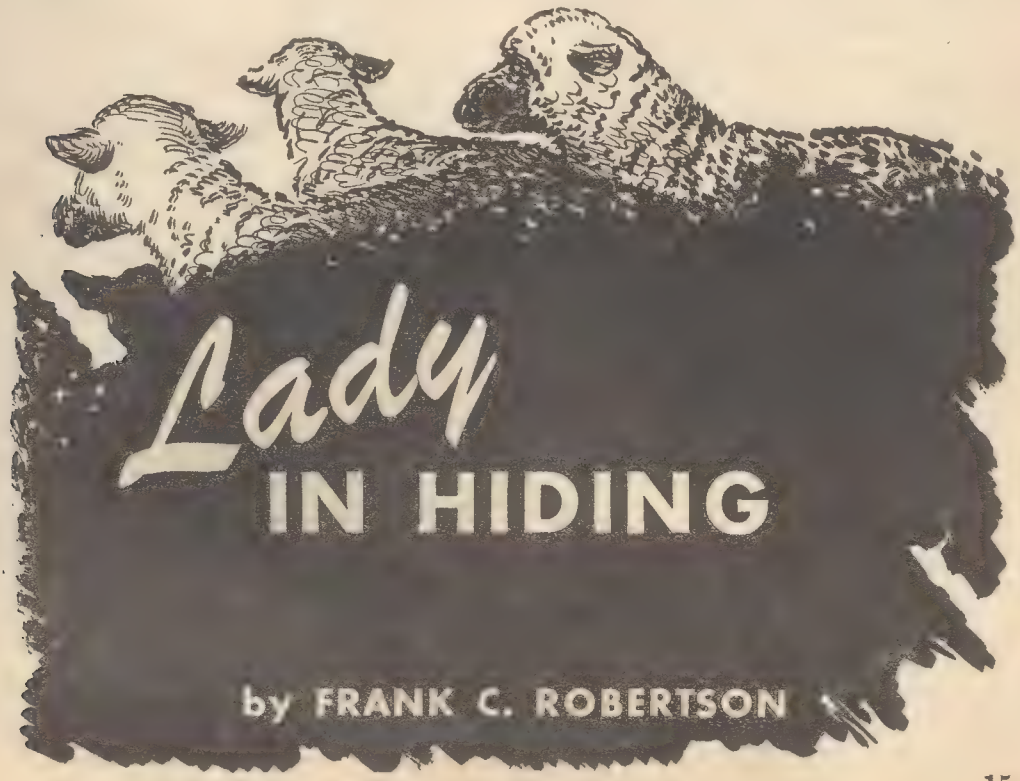
At least fifty times George had dragged a reluctant ewe across the creek, and the lower half of him was soaked with icy creek water, the upper half drenched with sweat.

"Ees no use, I theenk," Juan said. "They no cross till they geet hongry."

George exploded, "Damn all sheep, and damn any man fool enough to monkey with them. For two cents I'd stomp some of their foolish brains out."

Juan said, "I would not do that. Thees girl up on the ridge she might geet shock'."

"Girl?" George glanced toward the top of the ridge indicated by Juan, even as



Lady IN HIDING

by FRANK C. ROBERTSON

Juan said, "She be there about two hours, I theenk."

George had been too busy to inspect the scenery, but there, sitting calmly upon a rock watching them was a girl—at least thirty miles from any habitation, in the center of a mountain range where as yet this summer there hadn't been even a sheep-herder.

Half in anger he yelled, "Hey, you, come down here."

To his surprise the girl rose and strolled down the hill. She wore a much washed chambray shirt and blue jeans, and a crop of dark brown hair splashed over her shoulders. She was tall and slender and walked with lithe grace. Closer, he saw that her eyes were blue and her mouth wide and firm. She was tanned from much living in the outdoors. He made a guess that she was between twenty-one and twenty-five.

Now that he had called her down he didn't know what to say. It had been in his mind to give her a bawling out, but she had a right to sit on a ridge top if she wanted.

She said coolly, "I presume you want some help to cross those stupid sheep."

"Never mind the sheep, they won't cross till they get good and ready."

"They would if you'd sprinkle some salt on the other side."

"Likely would, but we haven't got any salt."

"Where's your camp?"

"We sent it around over the old Lander cut-off, and just brought our bed and some lunch. It'll be waiting for us twenty miles ahead."

"And the way you're going you'll catch up with it some time next fall." She grinned, and George saw that she had nice teeth.

"What're you doing here?" George asked.

"Minding my own business. Excuse me, I didn't mean to be rude. I've been here ever since the snow went off—prospecting."

"You don't—live alone?"

She eyed him sharply and patted the sixgun which nestled comfortably in a holster at her hip. She said, "I've got good medicine for sheepherders with ideas."

George blushed and said angrily, "The remark was prompted by justifiable curiosity. You have no right to assume—"

"All right, I'll withdraw the remark. I knew that some sheepherder would be along some time, and it does get pretty lonesome up here. If you're short on grub I'll feed you—and loan you a sack of table salt."

"All right, miss, I'll accept. Juan will have to watch the sheep, so you can ride his horse. Your name—"

"Just call me Effie." She swung onto Juan's horse like a person used to riding.

HER CABIN was farther from the stock trail than he had anticipated, at least two miles back in a remote hidden canyon. It was an old prospector's cabin that had been reroofed with poles and dirt, and the one window had been covered with canvas. The floor was hard-packed dirt, but it was clean as were all the crude, homemade furnishings. On the way up George noticed sign of placering that must have been done many years before. He recalled that there had once been a minor gold rush in these mountains.

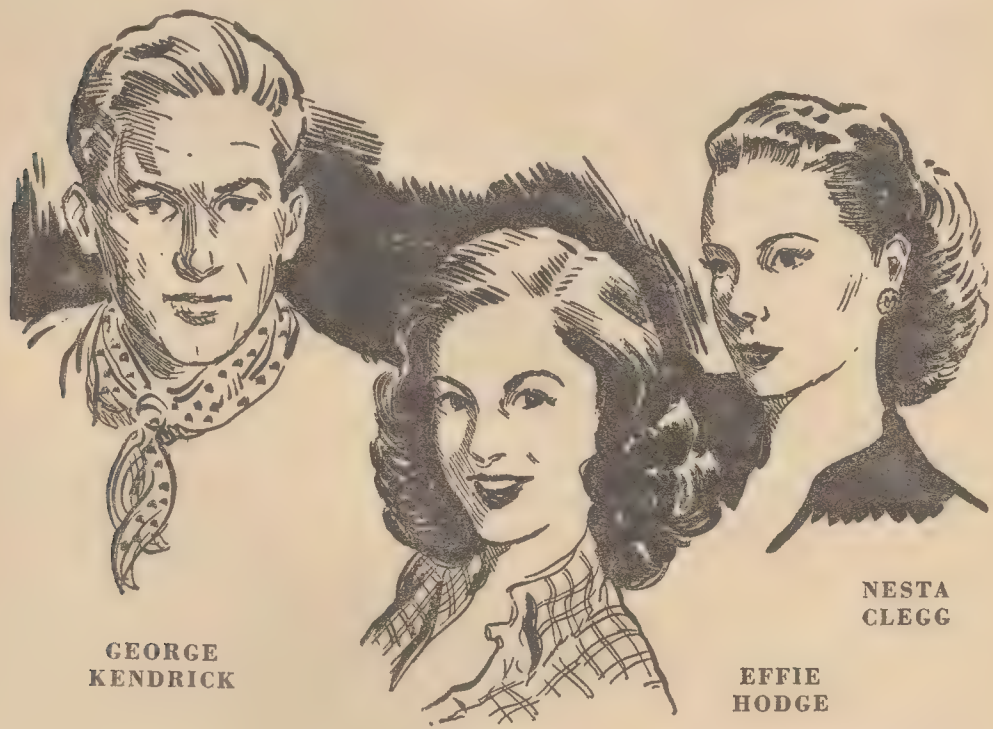
"Make yourself at home," Effie said. "I've got beans and rice pudding, and it won't take long to make coffee."

"Don't you own a horse?"

"No, but I've got a couple mules."

"You know, a girl prospector is something new to me," he said, "and I really thought this country was worked out or proved no good years ago."

Effie said, "When I was a mere child my father built this cabin. Mother and I put in two summers here with him. Both of them are dead now, but Father always thought there was more gold than had been found. So, I'm spending my vacation looking for it."



It sounded plausible enough, and yet George had the feeling she wasn't telling all the truth, and she had a manner of wanting to forestall further questioning.

She soon had dinner ready, and it was a good meal. She apologized for the lack of meat. "I was hoping that when the sheep came I could get some camp mover to bring supplies out from town for me. That's really why I was watching you."

"I guess it could be arranged. You see, I own three other herds, and this happens to be on my allotment."

Effie was embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I—I—thought you were just a sheepherder. When will you be going to town?"

"In about a week. I'll stop in before I go."

"Thanks. You don't know how much I appreciate it."

Looking around the cabin, George caught sight of a black lace evening gown hanging on a nail. Nothing could have been more incongruous in these mountains than that dress. Effie was becoming more of a woman of mystery by the minute.

Effie, carrying an ample lunch for Juan Batista, returned to the herd with George, who had a small bag of table salt which he spread in small piles on the other side of the creek where the sheep could see it. Presently one salt-hungry old ewe gave a bleat and waded across. In a moment the entire herd was charging after her.

"You see," Effie said, "all that whooping and ranting you did was unnecessary."

George said, "Don't remind me of it."

Effie refused a lift back to her cabin, and George and Juan were soon under way. If they were lucky, they would meet the camp mover the next afternoon. The other herds would soon be along.

THAT night Juan said, "W'en old Tom Wingate geet up 'ere I theenk he lak Black Mountain better than back yonder. Mebbe we change herds, no?"

George looked at the handsome young Mexican. Unlike most herders, Juan never let himself get sloppy. He wore good clothes, shaved every day, and played the guitar.

"Go to sleep and forget about that girl," George grunted.

"I sleep, but forget, no," Juan said, turning upon his side.

A week later George was back with a herd within a mile of Effie's cabin, and Juan was the band's new herder.

Next morning George rode over to Effie's cabin. She wasn't there but the stove was still warm. Remembering her mention of a sluice-box over the next ridge, he rode over and found her dolefully examining the gravel washed during the night.

He called, "Hello. Any luck?"

"Not a particle. There's more gold in my teeth than there is in these mountains," she answered with a wry grin.

"The only gold here is green. We call it grass."

"Have you got your sheep settled?"

"Yep, and I'm on my way to town. Got that list ready?"

"Here it is."

"Sure you don't want to ride in with me?"

Unless he was mistaken a look of fear came over her face. "No," she said shortly.

Her two mules were close by, and she decided to ride part way back with him. She mounted the larger mule bareback and the other followed.

He said, "Do you know you made a conquest the other day? My herder Juan asked to be transferred to the herd here. You'll see a lot of him."

"How nice."

Why the devil had he said that, he wondered. He had implied that she hadn't impressed him—and it wasn't true. He was engaged to be married, but he had never met a girl who intrigued him quite the way this girl did.

IT TOOK all day to make the trip to Antler. George bought his own supplies, then handed Effie's list to the clerk.

"Hey, what's this?" the man exclaimed. "Since when have you sheepherders gone in for lip rouge and face powder?"

"The back of my hand to you. I'm buying this for a prospector's daughter."

"Well, it should be as good a version as the traveling salesman and the farmer's daughter," the clerk laughed.

"You got any old newspapers?" George asked.

"Sure. We always keep everything we get for you sheps." The clerk dragged out a bundle of newspapers which ran back at least two weeks, but to the lonely sheepherders they would be a godsend. Only, George was getting them for Miss Effie.

He got back to Juan's camp just before dark the next day. He had stayed at a hotel in Antler the night before because if he had gone to his own ranch, ten miles beyond, he would have had to stop and visit his fiancée, Nesta Clegg, on the way.

George asked casually, "Seen Effie?"

Juan grinned. "Today, while the sheepies shade up we geet ver' well acquaint'."

"You try any funny business, you'll get more than that."

George was at the girl's cabin before sunrise, but like himself she had already had breakfast. "Heard you had company yesterday," he remarked as she was putting her supplies away.

She looked puzzled at first. "Oh, Juan. He sings and plays the guitar beautifully."

"Sounds like a catamount with quinsy to me. Watch out or you'll have him screeching around your cabin every night."

When she had finished her chores he gave her the newspapers. "Thought you might like to catch up on the back news," he said.

In her eagerness she almost forgot to thank him. She started hurriedly to look them over, then ceased abruptly and said, "Almost forgot I'm a prospector. I'll look them over later."

George rode away, but he would have bet money she scanned those papers closely before she visited her sluice box.

He had other herds to visit, so it was nightfall before he returned to Juan's camp. Juan said, "You know, I theenk thees mountain geet too populate'."

"Why?"

"Too many people. Today two beeg men weeth the new clothes an' the sunburn snoop around my camp. I no lak them."

"What did they want?" George asked sharply.

"Firs' they want to know eef I know of any ol' placer mines aroun' here. Then they say, 'You see anytheeng of yong lady?' "

George's lips were suddenly dry. "What did you tell 'em?"

"Me?" Juan said innocently. "I no spika de Engleesh."

Whoever these men were they were looking for Effie, and it was apparent that the girl didn't want to be found. It might mean nothing—these men might even be relatives—but she might be in some sort of trouble.

When he saw Juan tuning up his guitar after supper he said, "Put it away, Miss Effie won't be needing any music tonight."

"Ees pity. My guitar she sound ver' sweet," Juan said softly.

MOST people in the mountains went to bed when it got dark and it was very dark several hours later, when George approached the girl's cabin. He expected to wake her with a shout but before he quite arrived there she challenged from the shelter of a clump of trees: "What do you want?"

He was sure the wrong answer would get him a bullet. He said, "It's me—George Kendrick."

Her voice was steel hard as she repeated, "What do you want?"

"Well, partly, I came to head off Juan. He was planning to serenade you."

Evidently she didn't see any humor in the remark. She warned, "After this just come around in the daytime."

"Well, the other reason I came was because Juan saw a couple of strangers today who asked him if he had seen a stray girl in these mountains."

He heard her gasp and hastened to reassure her. "Juan doesn't speak English when he don't want to. He told them nothing. But maybe I can locate their camp if you want to see them."

"Oh, no! I—I don't want to see anybody."

It was a minute or so before she could

collect herself. "They couldn't be looking for me," she said. "Nobody knows I'm in these mountains except you and Juan."

"I don't like the idea of you being up here alone and unprotected."

"That's sweet of you, George, but I'll be all right. I have my gun and my father taught me years ago how to use it. Good night."

George rode off down the trail, but he didn't propose to leave her unguarded. He left his horse well off the trail and walked back through the timber until he was within a hundred yards of the cabin. Here he established himself for the night.

It was a long, chilly time before dawn. Effie would be up soon and it was best to get away before she discovered him. He rose, flexed his numbed muscles, then suddenly tensed as he saw movement in the trees just beyond the cabin. An instant later the door opened and Effie stepped outside.

They were the two men Juan had described, and one of them barked, "Hold it, Miss Hodge!" He held an automatic pistol in his hand, and his companion a rifle. They were obviously city men despite their expensive mountain garb, yet they looked plenty hard.

Effie, caught completely off guard, flattened herself against the wall. For once she wasn't wearing her sixgun. She said, "Well, Mr. Bickmore, you came to kill me—why don't you shoot?"

The man's voice was almost pleasant as he answered, "Why should I shoot you, Miss Hodge, since the electric chair is waiting for you anyway? But if you're a good girl and turn over those records you stole you can escape even that."

Her voice betrayed fright as she said, "I have no records."

"Don't give me that," Bickmore said. "You've been pretty hard to find, but I happened to remember Carpenter mentioning one time that your father used to prospect out here. Of course the police will find out about it eventually, too."

"Too bad they couldn't have found me first."

Bickmore said, "Go on in the cabin, Mac, and pick up any stray weapons you see. Then you follow him, Henrietta."

"Why don't you shoot me and get it over with?"

"Because so far you've kept your mouth shut, and that's all to the good. You give me the records you stole from Carpenter before you killed him and I might be persuaded to help you get out of the country."

"I'll see you in hell first," she said flatly.

"Look, my girl. Everybody knows you killed Carpenter, and we can prove that you were his mistress and had been bleeding him for money."

"That's a lie!"

"Of course—but we can prove it just the same. And you can't prove anything without moving right onto the hot seat. You see, Miss Hodge; I know more about you than you think. You're the secretive, self-reliant type. If you hadn't been you wouldn't have tried to expose Carpenter all by yourself. You're afraid to give yourself up, so you're holding those records just in case you are arrested, and we're going to get them," Bickmore said.

GEORGE couldn't hear Effie's reply, but he knew it was a defiant one.

Bickmore was unperturbed. There was no hint of bluffing in his voice as he said, "We'll search the cabin, and then we'll search you—right down to the skin. After that Mac will try to make you talk, and he has very persuasive ways. If that fails, we'll just see that you never talk to anybody else."

Mac had disappeared, and now Bickmore followed the girl into the cabin. George felt that it was time to move.

The hard black walnut handle of George's sixgun nestled in his hand as he loomed suddenly in the cabin doorway. Effie was seated at one end of her little homemade table while Bickmore was standing at the other, his automatic still in hand. The burly Mac was searching the girl's bunk. Mac was wearing an automatic in a shoulder holster and had stuck Effie's sixgun under his belt, but he had leaned his rifle against the wall, just inside the door.

George's fear was that Bickmore would shoot Effie, but he had the man covered. "Drop your gun," he said, his words coming out in an involuntary snarl.

Bickmore's startled glance darted toward George, but his gun remained pointed at the girl. He was a cool customer. George knew that if he fired, Effie would die. The scene held for a minute, then, with his free hand, George seized Mac's rifle and tossed it to Effie.

He drew Bickmore's fire to himself as he had expected, but Mac, too, had drawn his automatic as he whirled, and it was to Mac that George shifted his aim at the last instant. His bullet plunked into Mac's belly at the same instant he felt the impact of a slug in his own body.

He tried to shift his aim back to Bickmore as he lunged desperately forward, but the shot struck a dishpan hanging on the wall with a tinny crash. He stumbled, and Bickmore's bullet almost parted his hair. His arms wound around Bickmore's ankles and both men struck the dirt floor.

George clung to the legs in desperation as Effie stepped past him and thrust the muzzle of the rifle against Bickmore's chest. She had caught George's toss of the rifle neatly. Bickmore dropped his gun, and the girl cried wildly, "Why don't I kill you?"

George dragged himself to his feet. His right shoulder felt heavy and throbbed with pain. He looked at Mac. The man had dropped back upon the bunk with his arms clasped over his stomach. Distress and fear showed in his eyes before he toppled over sideways. Painfully George picked up Bickmore's gun and staggered over to a bench.

"George, you're hurt!" Effie cried.

"Problem is," he said, "what do we do with these coyotes?"

Bickmore sat up on the floor. He looked ruffled but calm. He said, "You've just killed a man, sheepherder, and Miss Hodge is already wanted for murder. You're both in a mess."

"Then killing you won't make us any worse off," George said grimly. "You can easy talk yourself into getting a nice hot bullet."

Bickmore said, "Suppose we all be reasonable for a minute, and no harm will come of this. You give me what I want, Miss Hodge, we'll quietly bury Mac and everybody keeps their mouths shut, and nothing will come of all this."

Effie said, "You couldn't be trusted."

"Why not? I stand to profit by it. To tell the truth, Henrietta, you did me a favor when you bumped off Carpenter. Now I've got his job." The man had the nerve to sit there and grin.

George was still in the dark as to what it was all about. Effie, or Henrietta Hodge as her name seemed to be, had killed a man, and she had something this crook Bickmore wanted. All he could be sure of was that he had just killed a man himself.

Effie said, "All right, Bickmore, we'll make a deal, but I'm doing it only to save George. He didn't know the score."

"Hell, no sheepherder ever knew the score," Bickmore taunted. [*Turn page*]

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"The first thing is to look at that wound of yours, George," Effie said hastily as he showed signs of wanting to straddle Bickmore.

SHE CUT his shirt and examined the wound. He could still use his arm so she diagnosed that no bones were broken. It was a flesh wound but a deep and painful one.

Effie had strong, capable hands. "I'll disinfect this and bandage you up so you can get to a doctor," she said tenderly.

"And then you plan to bury this dead man out here?"

"Yes. Nobody will ever miss him, and there is no reason why you should face a murder charge."

"I don't like it."

Bickmore said, "You can hang yourself, of course, but if you do, you'll send Miss Hodge to the electric chair."

George looked at Miss Hodge, and there was pleading in her eyes as she returned the look. She said, "I'll tell you all about it, George, after we bury this man."

There seemed nothing to do except go along. He had killed Mac, so despite the pain of his wound he rode with Bickmore and Effie to an overhanging cutbank. Bickmore and Effie wrapped Mac's body in a blanket and placed it under the cutbank. A little undermining brought down several tons of dirt over the dead man.

All the time George thought it a mistake. Had he been the only one concerned he would have taken the body to town himself, or at least have notified the sheriff. Once the corpse was buried he felt more strongly than ever that it wouldn't stay that way, and when it was found it would look far worse for him. "Now," Bickmore said, "I'll take those records."

All the strength and defiance seemed to have gone out of Effie. "All right," she said meekly, "they're hidden in the trees close to the cabin."

"Look here," George burst out, "if I'm in this I want to know what it's all about."

"Nothing doing," Bickmore said. "Why, you're one of the suckers I make my dough from."

"I loaded it onto Jenny, and I took it far back into the mountains"

"Stay out of it, George, and get that wound attended to," Effie begged. "I'll be all right now."

George gave a grumbling assent and rode off toward the trail to town. But he

didn't go far. He stationed himself in a thicket beside the main trail and waited. It was almost two hours later when Bickmore came along, whistling happily.

The whistle died on his lips as George rode out, sixgun pointed. George said grimly, "I'll take those records now."

"Why, you fool," Bickmore blustered, "those papers are the only thing that stands between you and the gallows—and the Hodge girl and the hot seat."

"I'll take 'em just the same. I'm tired of sitting into a game blindfolded. Keep your hands away from that gun. What's in that briefcase you're carrying?"

The exasperated look on Bickmore's face told him the papers he wanted were in that case. Though it hurt like sixty he reached out with his sore arm and took the briefcase.

Bickmore said, "Give it back or so help me I'll tell the law where that body is."

"I've got a hunch you won't. Now trundle your carcass."

Swearing mightily, Bickmore set spurs to his horse and galloped down the trail.

George knew of a longer, rougher but far safer trail out of the mountains, and he took it. After an hour of climbing he got off to rest and examine the contents of his prize.

An examination of the papers left him stunned and bewildered. Now he understood why Bickmore had said that he was one of the suckers from whom he got his money.

EVERY time he, George, shipped a carload of sheep to a commission house in any of the three big Eastern stockyards he had been robbed of from one to three percent of their weight through crooked scale manipulations. His few carloads, multiplied by the thousands upon thousands of sheep and cattle that poured in from the Western ranges made the take tremendous.

Rapid calculation showed that he lost approximately fifty dollars each on the twenty carloads or more of lambs which he shipped every fall. It amounted to a tidy sum.

Neither the stockyards nor the commission houses were guilty, he learned, nor were the scales always rigged. When they were, however, this firm of fake buyers or speculators, knowing that the animals would actually weigh out much heavier when sold to the processors, had only to step in, bid a little higher than the market price and make a neat profit on the resale.

This firm, the evidence in the briefcase showed, had been headed by Boswell P. Carpenter, the man Effie was accused of killing. Apparently she had been Carpenter's private secretary—he had heard Bickmore assert that it could also be falsely proved she had been his mistress—and she seemed to have been able to collect practically all the records the firm had.

The key to the whole thing had been the bribery or compulsion of the scale operators and certain inspectors. There were indications that gangster methods had been employed by a well trained organization.

He found no mention of Bickmore's name, but there were notations indicating that large sums of money had been paid out for "maintenance." It wasn't hard to guess that this was to a strong-arm gang, of which Lee Bickmore was probably the head.

George had all the facts needed to break up the conspiracy, but the catch was that if he used it both he and Effie, or Henrietta Hodge as her right name appeared to be, would be arrested for murder.

He wanted to go back and talk to the girl, but he urgently needed to see a doctor. He didn't believe Bickmore would be in a hurry to act but would first have another try at getting hold of the damning records.

It was nearly daybreak when George arrived at his own ranch, so sick and weak he could scarcely sit in the saddle. He dismounted and before unsaddling his horse stuck the briefcase in a gunny sack and covered it deeply with oats in a bin in the granary. He staggered to the house, roused Jensen, his ranch foreman, and sent him to Antler for a doctor without telling him he had been shot.

Dr. Beniger, an old friend, arrived a couple hours later. His eyes popped when he saw the gunshot wound. "You've no

business riding around with a wound like that," he exploded. "How did you get it, and who bandaged you up?"

George replied, "It was an accident, Doc. One of the boys accidentally let his gun go off, and it won't do any good to have it talked about, so I hope you won't say anything about it. I promised him I wouldn't tell his name."

"Hm-m. What kind of a gun?"

"Automatic. It was new and he wasn't used to it," George explained.

"He fix this wound up?"

George hesitated a moment. No sheepherder could do as neat a job as Effie had done, and the doctor knew it. "No," he said, "a stranger happened along after the accident."

"Well, it's pretty irregular, but although it would be impossible for you to shoot yourself the way you were shot, I'll report it that way if you insist."

"Thanks, Doc," George said. It would be all right unless the body of the man Mac was found, in which event the cooked up story would make matters look much worse.

Dr. Beniger said, "You keep yourself in bed at least a week."

George summoned a ranch boy named Harold Ross and sent him out to the sheep to tell Charley Bartlett, the man who moved camp for Juan Batista and another herder called "Steptoe" Wills, that George wouldn't be back to the summer range for a week. "I'd just as lief stay up there," the boy said.

"Behind in your fishing, hunh? You be back here tomorrow night. Just tell Juan Batista that he has a free hand."

JUAN would take it that he was to keep an eye out for Effie, and it wouldn't displease him at all. He would probably see her every noon and serenade her every night, but he might give Lee Bickmore a surprise if the fellow tried any funny business.

George stayed in bed a few hours, but

[*Turn page*]

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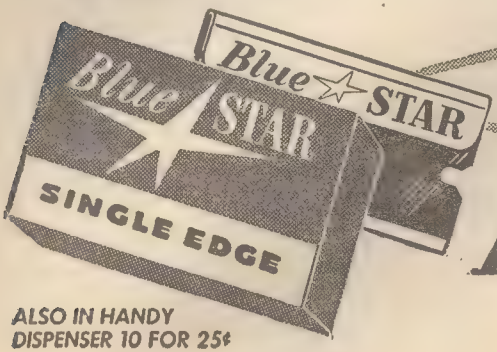

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since his arm was in a sling he thought he might as well sit up. He was feverish and worried. It was with no degree of pleasure that he saw a tall, blonde girl striding mannishly up the path, though normally he would have been pleased to see her, since she was the girl he expected to marry.

She burst into the house like a cyclone. "George, why didn't you tell me you had been hurt?" she demanded. There was fond accusation in her big blue eyes, and a faint pout on her red lips.

"Who told you I was?" he asked.

"Dr. Beniger. He said you had been in some kind of an accident."

"The double-crossing old coot! He promised not to talk."

"But what happened?"

"I shot myself—nothing serious."

"But you might have been killed," Nesta Clegg said. "I'm going to appoint myself your nurse."

There was nothing he could do about it, because Nesta was a self-assertive girl who was always sure that she knew best. He hated himself for comparing her unfavorably with Effie Hodge. Effie was a murderess, a girl with a mystery in her past, and an uncertain future. He had known her little more than a week, and already she had gotten him into the worst crisis of his life. Yet there was something free and unaffected about her which somehow made Nesta seem artificial.

He was nervous and edgy until Harold Ross returned late the next day.

"Juan said everything was okay up there, and for you to take lots of time coming back," the boy reported.

"He did, hunh?" He should have been pleased by the report but he wasn't. He wondered suddenly if he was jealous of Juan. The gay young Mexican with his guitar could be stiff competition, provided George was personally interested in Effie—which he told himself he wasn't.

He had more cause to worry about Lee Bickmore. He knew the fellow was not going to surrender without a fight. George had seen enough in those records to know that Bickmore and his associates had been plundering the stockyards to the tune of several hundred thousand dollars every year. The contents of that briefcase, if made known, would end it all. He wasn't going to give up trying to get those damning records.

He had persuaded Nesta to go home that night, but she had promised to be back the next morning. He decided suddenly that he would not be there when she returned, so in spite of the doctor's orders he was in the saddle at daybreak, headed back for the summer range. He had to ride slowly, and it was an hour past dark before he reached Juan's camp. He could locate it by the smell of the sheep, but there was no sign of Juan, his dog, or his guitar.

About midnight he heard the herder coming down the canyon, strumming his guitar and singing *La Paloma.* Juan was taken aback at finding his bed occupied.

"Boss, I no look for you back!" he exclaimed.

"Evidently not. Seen the sheep lately?"

"See the sheeps? What you mean?"

"Thought maybe you'd been too busy serenading Miss Hodge to bother about the herd," George said crossly.

"Ho! I theenk you joke. The senorita ees ver' lonesome. W'en the sheeps shade up or bed down I go keep the company."

"Sure, sure," George grunted. "Come to bed and shut up."

He had no right to be angry with Juan. The sheep hadn't been neglected, and Juan was only being gallant and neighborly. George was honest enough to admit to himself that Spanish charm offered just a little too much competition to a blunt American.

GEORGE didn't get around to calling on Effie until nearly noon, and not finding her home he rode over to her sluice box. She was so intent upon sloshing a gold pan around that she didn't hear him until he was almost upon her. She nearly dropped the pan.

"Eureka!" she yelled. "I've struck it. Bet I've washed half an ounce." Suddenly she put down the pan and looked at him with hands on hips. "Say, what're you doing here?" she demanded.

"Don't you remember? I run sheep. And when I have nothing else to do I run around killing and burying people."

She said sharply, "Don't talk like that. You're hurt, and you sent back word you wouldn't come for a week."

"That's too bad, isn't it? Now Juan will have to herd sheep instead of playing the guitar."

"I like to hear Juan play and sing. Couldn't you herd the sheep so he can entertain me all the time?"

"No, I couldn't. I pay the cuss wages and once in a while he's got to earn 'em."

She said seriously, "You haven't heard any more from—from Lee Bickmore?"

"No, and it worries me."

you're in a fair way to get both of us arrested for murder. I didn't think you were such a fool."

George flushed a little. "If I'd given them back I'd be robbed every time I shipped my lambs, and so would every other stockman. I just can't swallow it."

"Keeping the records won't stop it because Bickmore knows you won't dare use them for fear of being arrested for murder. But if you knew Bickmore you'd know that he wouldn't stop at anything to get them back."

"That's what I'm hoping."

"You're crazy. Bickmore will be back, and he'll have a gang of gunmen from the city with him. You and your sheep-

A light flashed on in the granary. He heard Bickmore say, "What's up?"

She said somewhat bitterly, "He's got those records, he won't bother us any more."

"That's just the point. He hasn't got 'em."

"What?"

"Your briefcase and its contents are hidden at my ranch."

She looked stunned. "You—you mean you got them away from him?"

"I held him up. Imagine he was taking them back to town to find out just how much you knew about that crooked scale deal."

"Then you studied them. And now herders won't stand a chance."

George was thoroughly angry. It was true that he wasn't a gunman, nor were his men, but it didn't sit well for this girl, whose life he had surely saved, to taunt him with it. For that matter he wasn't afraid of Bickmore and his thugs either.

He said coldly, "No doubt you know all about Bickmore's methods."

"Meaning you think I wasn't trying to stop that crooked deal but killed Carpenter because I was trying to muscle in on it."

"I don't know what happened, nor what your motives were."

"And I can see that it would do no good to tell you. But I want you to understand one thing. I was never Boswell P. Carpenter's mistress. He was a fat, odious, disgusting beast."

"I understood that."

SHE SAID abruptly, "Let's not quarrel—we're both in too tough a spot. But I would like to tell you what happened."

"I'm listening."

"Carpenter was a pretty big figure in the stockyards. He said he gave me a job on account of my father, whom he used to know, but it wasn't long before I realized that something crooked was going on. Then a man named Harry Weiser, whom I had often seen around the office with Lee Bickmore, was arrested for operating a crooked set of scales, and was let go on bail. He was found shot to death. I asked Carpenter some questions, and he said that if I got nosy he could blacken my father's memory."

"Where did this Bickmore fit in?"

"He ran the outside work, second in command to Carpenter, but he was seldom around the office, and when I got to going through the records I found that he was smart enough not to have his name appear."

"Did you kill Carpenter?"

"I don't think so. I had been quietly assembling the evidence I wanted and one night I went to the office to get it, and Carpenter surprised me. I guess he had gotten suspicious. I had bought a gun, but I didn't mean to kill anybody. Carpenter got me pinned in a corner and threatened to kill me. He rushed, I drew the gun, and in the scuffle the gun went off, but I'm sure he pulled the trigger. Anyway, the gun fell and I grabbed the briefcase I had put the records into and ran."

"How did they know it was you?"

"They identified the gun as mine, and my fingerprints were on it. Bickmore and others swore that I had been blackmailing Carpenter. I knew that I didn't have a chance unless I got out of Chicago. I was able to make it out here where I had lived as a child, and I thought I would be safe. You know the rest, George."

She looked utterly pathetic as she finished, and George believed that he was hearing the truth. She had certainly gotten mixed up with an unscrupulous gang. And he was sure now that Bickmore hadn't given up.

His first thought was to get her to another hiding place, but she flatly refused to leave. She said, "I'm tired of running and hiding. If it wasn't for your trouble I'd give myself up and get it over with. It's what I should have done in the first place, but I got panicky."

"I still think it's what we should do," George said, but not very convincingly. They had blundered badly when they allowed Bickmore to bury his man Mac. His own chances would be better than Effie's, for at best her good name would be destroyed. At worst she could be sentenced to death.

"Either that or give Bickmore back the records," she said. "It's up to you."

She had, in effect, placed her life in his hands. Nothing could be done until Bickmore made some move, and there was no evidence that he was still in the country.

George had scarcely reached his own camp before he had a visitor. His heart skipped a beat when he saw the silver star on the vest of Tony Hart, a deputy sheriff with whom he had been on casually friendly terms.

They exchanged greetings and George, according to range custom, asked if Hart had eaten. Hart signified that he had, but he dismounted.

"Heard you had an accident the other day," he said.

"Kind of trivial," George replied, although his arm was in a sling. "Teach me not to monkey with guns I don't understand."

"What kind of gun?"

"Automatic."

"Got it around?"

"No. One of my herders was going to buy it from another fellow, but after I shot myself he didn't want it."

Hart said, "Haven't seen anything of a lost city dude up here, have you?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, a fellow named Bickmore said a friend of his had come up in these mountains several days ago, and hadn't got back. Said he was several days overdue." Hart, a shrewd officer with Indian blood in his veins, bent a glance upon George that made him shiver inwardly.

George said, "I believe one of the herders did mention seeing a couple fellows, but that was quite some time ago."

They talked about sheep until Hart left.

Sending the deputy sheriff out to look for a man who might later be found murdered was a tip-off that Bickmore was still very much in the game. But still there was nothing George could do but wait.

FOR A couple days nothing happened. Effie seemed to have given up on the prospecting and spent much of the time at Juan's camp, keeping George company, and keeping him quiet. Between times Juan entertained with his guitar.

Then they had more company, about the last company George wanted to see. They were just sitting down to dinner when Nesta Clegg rode up with George's pet aversion, her Uncle Bill.

The smile on Nesta's face faded the moment she saw the tall girl sitting cross-legged on the ground a few feet from George.

She said, "I rode all the way up here, George, to see how you were getting along. Am I intruding?" Her voice was as thick with suspicion as the Missouri is of mud.

George managed a hollow laugh. "Intruding? Of course not. Miss Clegg, let me present Miss—Miss—" He was stricken dumb with horror. He couldn't give Effie's real name, and he knew that his hesitation was damning in Nesta's eyes.

Effie said calmly, "Miss Hodge. How do you do."

George contributed, "She is a lady prospector."

Nesta's enormous blue eyes reflected her skepticism. "Indeed! And how much gold have you found, Miss Hodge—and where did you find it?"

"Not in George's pocket, Miss Clegg, if that's what you're thinking."

"Of course not. There are too many holes in George's pocket. You live here with these men?" There was just the proper lift to Nesta's eyebrows.

"I have a cabin of my own. Juan keeps me supplied with music."

"And George with mutton, no doubt."

George blushed a little. He had given Effie a hindquarter of mutton only yesterday. He said curtly, "Don't be nasty, Nesta. Get off, and Juan will get you some dinner. I'm still wondering why you came."

Bill Clegg, a bachelor of forty, and a born trouble-maker said, "We're just *beginning* to wonder."

Nesta descended from her horse with the manner of an outraged queen. She said, "You sneaked away without telling me you were going. I was worried. I was afraid you had come up there and got

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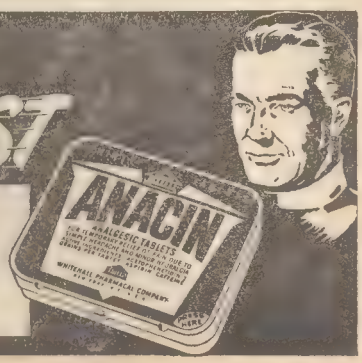

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sick. But I see that I shouldn't have worried."

Bill Clegg said, "Go ahead and fight; I'm going to eat."

Nesta said, "I brought your mail." She handed over a small packet of letters and advertisements.

George sifted them half furtively through his hands. Nothing of any importance, except one slim envelope with no return address, postmarked Antler. He shifted it hurriedly into the center of the packet.

Effie finished eating, walked over and washed her tin dishes leisurely, then said, "Well, I must be going. Jack and Jenny will be getting lonesome."

"Take my horse," George offered.

"No, thanks, I'll just cut across. Thanks for the dinner. Nice meeting you, Miss Clegg. Odd, George has never spoken of you."

Nesta was looking daggers as she watched the tall, lithe girl walk away with long easy strides.

Bill said, "Wonder why Georgie boy has such a short memory."

"I can understand why he was in such a hurry to get back here when the doctor told him to stay in bed a week. Who is this girl? What's she *really* doing here?"

George shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"I can certainly guess," Nesta needled.

"Lay off, will you?" George said angrily.

Although in a pet, Nesta stowed away a full share of the mulligan and dried apricots. Then she announced that she and her uncle had brought along blankets and intended to stay all night. George had to pretend to be pleased.

NEITHER Nesta nor Bill offered to help do the dishes, a breach of camp etiquette. Juan hurried away to his sheep, and George was left to entertain the company. It was a long time before Nesta and Bill decided to take a walk and he got a chance to open the slender envelope.

He read, "Leave my property under the west end of the river bridge just outside Antler. If it is not there inside of three days I shall take proper action." It was unsigned, and the postmark was two days old.

He had to see Effie that night, but Nesta, her good humor seemingly restored, insisted upon talking until midnight. He waited a couple hours after that then stole away from camp, and made the trip to Effie's cabin on foot.

When he had convinced her who he was she let him come inside the cabin. She said, "You'll be in a fix if your sweetheart ever finds out about you calling on me this hour of the night."

"Never mind Nesta. She brought me a note from Bickmore." He handed her the unsigned note and she read it without surprise.

"What are you going to do?"

He looked at her miserably. "It's something we can't run from. If we turn that stuff over to Bickmore it won't stop him from trying to keep your mouth shut permanently, and if you are arrested the only defense you have will be gone. He's already got the law looking for Mac so I'm in for it too. Bickmore will find nothing under the bridge."

Effie gave a sigh that was almost like relief. She said, "I think that's better. I'll give myself up."

"Not right away," he said quickly. "I want to see what Bickmore will do. As it stands he holds all the cards. There's still a chance he may take a wrong step."

"I can tell you what he'll do. He'll send for a bunch of gorillas and try to knock us both off. The chances are they are already here."

"Then that gives us the only chance we'll ever have. We've got to tell somebody where those records are hidden in case something happens to us. I'm going back to Antler with Nesta and I'll tell Dr. Beniger. I'll tell you where they are hidden, and you can tell Juan. We can trust him."

She said, "I'm sorry I dragged you into this, George. Seems like I've done nothing but make mistakes. I shouldn't have run in the first place, and I shouldn't have made that deal with Bickmore. I promise

you I won't get scared any more."

The real reason he had hung back, he knew, was because he wanted to spare her the ignominy of facing the lies that Bickmore and his associates would pour upon her if she ever had to stand trial. Now it seemed that it couldn't be averted.

He looked at her, and suddenly he had taken her in his arms. She didn't resist, and he kissed her upon the lips. They were cold at first, then for a brief moment she responded with fervid intensity.

She pushed him away, and said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have let you do that. You'd better be getting back to camp before Miss Clegg misses you. She wouldn't have liked that at all."

"Maybe you didn't."

"I won't say that I didn't. Good night."

He got back to camp as quietly as he could, but in the morning Nesta said, "Where were you last night, George? I was frightened by a wolf or something and I called and called, but you didn't answer." Although her voice was smooth her sulky eyes and mouth were alive with suspicion.

"Guess I heard the wolf before you did, so I went up on the ridge to watch the sheep."

She said, "Oh," and he wondered if she knew there were no wolves in the mountains.

Before leaving, he warned Juan to keep watch over Effie, but realized that he should have warned him to watch the sheep.

ON THE way to Antler, Nesta said, "I don't believe that girl is up to any good. I'm going to find out where she came from."

He answered crossly, "Best thing you can do is keep your nose clean."

The nose went into the air. "I'm not used to being talked to like that. My nose is all right."

"Then you'd better keep it out of other folks' business."

Nesta insisted upon stopping in Antler to do some shopping, and while she was at it George saw Bickmore and two other men, who were obviously big city muggs, come out of a saloon. With them was an old native reprobate and ex-outlaw known as Mountain Jim. Bickmore recognized him, but passed by without speaking.

The presence of Mountain Jim indicated that Bickmore intended going back to the mountains. The bewhiskered old villain had no peer as a guide and mountain man. And he was utterly without scruple.

George knew he had to get back to the mountains. He left Nesta at her home and rode on to his own ranch, stopping only long enough to eat, and catch a fresh horse. At Antler he stopped to see Dr. Beniger, and got a round calling down for abusing his wound.

"At that," the doctor said, "you're strong as a horse, and I guess it'll take more than a bullet to kill you."

"This bullet won't do it, but I'm not so sure of the next," George said. "If I do run against another one, Doc, there's something I want you to do for me." He told the doctor where the briefcase was hidden and asked him to see that it went to the district attorney in Chicago.

"I never did believe the yarn you told me about that bullet," the doctor said. "I hope you've not been getting into trouble."

George was tempted to tell him about the dead man buried on Elk Mountain, but decided to keep quiet about that for the present.

Although he hurried the sun was a couple of hours high when he heard the sheep bells. He rode around the herd looking for Juan, but he wasn't there, and the sheep were not yet shaded for the day. Then he heard a whistle and looking around, saw Effie smiling at him from on top of a log. His sigh of relief was audible.

She called, "While you were away I thought I'd learn to herd sheep. But I didn't look for you back so soon."

"When did you get here?" he asked.

"I left the cabin before daylight."

He had now reached the log. "Lucky you did, I think. If Bickmore isn't up here he soon will be."

"You saw him?"

"With two city thugs, and an old human coyote who knows these mountains like the back of his hand."

"You're really worried, aren't you?"

"I'm not singing hallelujahs. And you'd better get off that log. You loom up like a cock pheasant."

She jumped down. "I've been awful for you, George," she said.

IF BICKMORE got his hands on this girl George knew that he would have to give up the records to save her life. Her safety now was all that counted.

He said, "I dodged that bridge, but they probably waited till dawn to see if I didn't come across. By this time they'll be well on their way. You can't go back to your cabin."

"What then?"

"Stick close to our camp, but not in it. I'll bring you what things you need."

She said, "George, I won't worry too much now if—if something does happen to me, because I don't think I'll be drawing you into it."

"I'm into it just as deep as you are."

"Not now. You see, they can't convict you of murder unless they have a *corpus delicti.*"

"What do you mean?"

"I moved Mac's body, George," she said, and gave an involuntary shudder of disgust. "I loaded it onto Jenny and I took it far back in the mountains where I'm pretty sure it'll never be found."

"Alone?" he asked incredulously. "You could at least have asked Juan—"

"I've got enough people into trouble. I had to do it alone. The prospecting has made me strong and I know how to use a pick and shovel. It was the nastiest job I ever had to do, but in a way I was glad to do it. It seemed the only thing I could ever do for you, George."

George was powerfully moved as he pictured the ghoulish work which this girl had forced herself to do for him. He didn't have too much faith that the body couldn't be found, but he wouldn't tell her that. He could only take her calloused hands and squeeze them tightly.

As soon as the sheep began shading up so that they could be left, George took Effie up behind him on his horse, and they rode to camp. Juan had breakfast ready, and Charley Bartlett, the camp mover, was also present. George told Charley to stay. Juan and Charley were probably no match for Mountain Jim and the gangsters, but they would both fight for Effie.

Breakfast over, George rode alone to Effie's cabin, despite her protests, and made a bundle of her necessities. These he carried some distance from the cabin, then returned to it to wait.

About noon his expected callers arrived, all four of them. Bickmore's two city men were complaining bitterly about soreness from the ride, and cursing the mountains. Mountain Jim listened with visible contempt.

They were obviously not planning on a surprise this time, but they were surprised themselves when George stepped around the corner of the cabin.

GEORGE said, "Looking for somebody, gentlemen?"

"Yeah, you," Bickmore replied. "Where's your lady friend?"

"So she got away without you seeing her? Good. By now she's on a train on her way to Chicago." George was surprised how natural it was to lie lately.

Bickmore growled, "Don't give me that. If I could see her I'll bet I could hit her with a rock. Didn't you get my note?"

"I got it."

"You know what'll happen if I don't get those papers, don't you?"

"I'm not sure I do. If you planned to tell anybody about Mac you wouldn't have sent Hart up here the other day on a wild goose chase, hoping to scare me, and you wouldn't have brought these gorillas, and that old badger, Mountain Jim, along with you. Jim and I are old friends."

Bickmore darted a quick, suspicious glance at Mountain Jim. The mountaineer growled, "He's a liar. I hate his guts. Hate all lousy sheepherders."

"Why, Jim, have you forgot all the big times we've had together?" George queried.

Mountain Jim was ready to explode with wrath. Every time he and George had met they had had trouble, and he knew that George was trying to discredit him with his new employer.

"Never mind," Bickmore barked. "I want those papers or else. And I want to see that girl."

"I've told you where to find 'em," George said.

"You're a fool. If Hodge ain't here we'll just use her cabin. And if she don't show up with the records she stole we'll dip up Mac's body, and wire to Chicago that we've found the girl who murdered Boswell P. Carpenter."

"I doubt if you could find your friend Mac," George said. It had been a gruesome task, but now he could be glad that Effie had moved the body of the dead Mac to another place. She had refused to tell him where it was. And it was the first thing George had said which seemed to cause Bickmore any alarm. Apparently the possibility that the body would be moved hadn't occurred to him.

BICKMORE said, "I'm tired of fooling around with you, shep. You stuck your neck into business that was no concern of yours, and you can't seem to understand that we're not schoolboys. We could cut you down right now and get a medal for it. Play ball with us and I'll notify your sheriff that I've heard from Mac in Chicago. Which'll it be?"

"The cutting down wouldn't be easy in view of the fact that I think I'm good enough to get you, and that there are enough of my boys in the brush to get the rest of you," George bluffed.

Mountain Jim blurted, "Don't believe it."

George said softly, "I told 'em not to hurt you, Jim."

"Damn your eyes, quiet tryin' to make me out a friend o' your'n," Mountain Jim yelled.

The two gorillas were in a bad mood, and obviously certain that they could deal with this hick. Mountain Jim was roaring mad. Only Bickmore was uncertain, for he had seen George Kendrick in action.

Bickmore said, "I'll give you just twenty-four hours."

"Fine. Miss Hodge should be in Chicago by that time. Another thing before I leave. This is Miss Hodge's cabin, and she doesn't want any trespassers. Keep out of it."

Deliberately George turned his back on them and walked away. The hair on the back of his neck felt like bristles for he more than half expected to get a bullet in the back, but apparently Bickmore made some sign for no shot was fired.

He didn't breathe easy until he was on his horse. He picked up Effie's bundle and hurried on to camp. He knew it wouldn't take Mountain Jim long to ascertain that there had been no one else in the brush. And it would be impossible to hide Effie for long without the mountaineer finding it out.

He believed that the safest place for her was at his ranch, but this she definitely vetoed.

"Why don't we just go in and give ourselves up?" she asked reasonably.

"I've been telling whoppers all over the place because I had to, but if we give up we've got to tell the whole truth. They'll crucify you, Effie, even though we can stop that swindle."

"We can't avoid it anyway."

"If we do it'll look like those gangsters scared us out. If we had anything on Bickmore I wouldn't hesitate a minute. I keep thinking he'll make a mistake. I told him you had gone to Chicago. If we could make him think you weren't here—"

"But I am here."

George didn't speak for a few minutes. Finally he said, "I've thought of something. It seems like our only hope, but it's a long chance for you to take."

She said, "I'll take any chance you say."

"It's the most dangerous gamble you can take, for what you'll have to do is let Bickmore find you."

She turned a little pale, but she didn't falter. "If it'll do any good, all right."

"I'm not sure that it will, and if it fails it'll cost you your life."

"I'd rather be killed here than face a certain conviction in Chicago. But what about you? Where will you be?"

"In jail probably. I'm going to Antler and tell Tony Hart the whole story. To save your life you tell Bickmore where the records are. I'll have Tony Hart waiting at my place for him to come and get 'em. If Tony can be talked into holding Bickmore and coming back here for the others you'll be all right."

They both recognized the long odds they would be taking. It was Effie's life George was gambling with, and the worst part of it was he would probably be lying in jail, depending upon another man who might or might not believe she was in danger. But the alternative was worse. Merely killing Lee Bickmore wouldn't help either of them in the long run.

Effie smiled. "Of course I'll be all right. I feel better now than any time since I left Chicago. At least things will be moving *somewhere.*"

IMMEDIATELY after dark George was on his way back to Antler. He had time to rest up a little in the livery stable loft before sunrise, but he was so stiff and sore he could scarcely rise. Without waiting for breakfast he hunted up Tony Hart and found the deputy all saddled and ready to ride. With him was Bill Clegg.

Clegg said, "Well, look who's here. Bring your lady friend in with you and save us a ride?"

"What's back of that crack?" George demanded.

"Well, whether you know it or not your little lady prospector out there is an escaped murderess," Clegg said gloatingly.

George saw all his plans going up in smoke. He wished he felt strong enough to poke Bill Clegg in the nose.

Clegg continued, "You can't put anything over on Nesta. Smart gal, my niece. Knew there was something fishy the minute she saw that gal, so she hunted up Tony here and described your friend, Effie. Tony had her look over some wanted notices and there was her picture big as life. Name's Henrietta Hodge, and she murdered her boss back in Chicago."

Hart said, "You know anything about this, George?"

"A damned sight more than Nesta or Bill knows," George said bitterly. "I rode all night just to see you. I'd like to talk to you—alone."

Clegg blustered, "If this concerns Nesta in any way I want—"

"It don't."

George leveled his gun

"Come on in, George, I'll talk to you," Hart said.

Half the force of George's appeal was lost because Hart already knew about Effie, but George stated his case as strongly and sincerely as he could.

When he had finished, Hart said, "If you killed a man and covered it up it'll be damned bad for you."

"I don't care about that. All I want is a square deal for Miss Hodge, and a chance to put those crooks behind bars. What have you got to lose by waiting until tonight to see if Bickmore don't come?"

"By that time the Hodge girl will probably be out of the state, or at least my county."

"I'll give you my word she won't leave."

Hart said, "My duty is plain. Lock you up and go get that girl."

"And let a gang of real crooks get away. Would I have come and told you what I

did if it wasn't on the level?"

"You're outside the law now."

"Am I? What evidence have you got that I killed a man except my word? Before you could properly arrest me you'd have to find the body."

"I might take a chance if Bill Clegg didn't know about the girl. Now it'll be all over town and people will ask why I ain't after her."

"They'll forget that if you break up a gang that has been stealing thousands of dollars every year from the big city stockyards," George argued. "Look, is Bill Clegg a deputy?"

"Well, sometimes he acts as a special deputy."

"Why not tell him you've just heard Miss Hodge is trying to make a railroad station down the line and send him down there? You can leave town today and get back to my ranch by dark."

Hart considered the matter, then said, "If this is a stall and that girl gets away it'll cost me my job, but if it does I'll sure as hell see that you swing. I'll play along with you till midnight. If nothing happens by then I'll be heading for Elk Mountain."

"You're drawing the time a little fine, but I appreciate it. I'll see you at the ranch tonight. Just remember that Miss Hodge's life is at stake," George said.

He hadn't expected Hart to allow him to remain at liberty. It was the biggest break he could have hoped for. In the meantime all he could do was sweat it out.

THE ROAD to his ranch ran past the Clegg place, but Nesta was the last person he wanted to see. Her curiosity had almost led to the complete disruption of his plans, and while she couldn't be blamed perhaps for a certain amount of jealousy he knew it would be hard to talk to her without telling her what he thought. And she was still capable of causing trouble. Weary as he was he took a roundabout way to avoid seeing her.

They were still engaged, and the idea of breaking the engagement had scarcely occurred to him. He was aware, however, that when he almost unconsciously compared her with Effie, Nesta appeared dull as mud. He realized too that Nesta would always try to run his life, and that, he knew, was something Effie would never try to do. Nesta's stock was low.

He was glad for a chance to rest when he got home, and he gave orders that if anyone asked for him they were to be told that he was with the sheep.

He fell asleep and didn't waken until his housekeeper called him to supper. He asked if there had been any visitors and Mrs. Jensen informed him that Nesta had called.

"She didn't seem to believe me, but I wouldn't let her in," the woman said.

George gave her a pat on the shoulder.

Tony Hart arrived an hour after dark. George got the briefcase out of the granary and Hart took an hour looking it over.

He said, "Seems to me this proves that there was a big scale swindle going on in the stockyards with fixed scales, but I don't see how they could have done it."

"By bribing the scale operators and a few inspectors. Those they couldn't buy they got fired or killed. It was, and still is, big business."

Hart grunted, and they replaced the briefcase in the oat bin. George climbed up on some boards above the joists in the granary where a considerable number of sacks had been piled and stretched out. It wasn't so uncomfortable, except that the dust made him sneeze every time he moved. Hart retired to a haystack, promising faithfully not to fall asleep.

There was no sleep for George from then on. By this time Effie should be a prisoner of Bickmore's and the fellow well on his way to reclaim the records. There was no telling where the girl might be or who was with her. And there was no way of knowing whether Bickmore would come alone or not.

It was too dark to look at his watch and he dared not strike a match for fear Bickmore might arrive and see it. He was sure that it was past midnight, the time Hart had threatened to leave. He

might already have gone, but George didn't dare climb down to find out.

More time went by and he became certain that Hart had left, although it seemed that he should have at least let George know. A worse fear was that Bickmore wouldn't come at all. If he didn't, the big gamble was lost.

He could hear mice running around on the oats beneath, and it was the sudden cessation of their noise which warned him that intruders were at hand. He turned on his face and felt for his gun as the door opened slowly and soundlessly.

A light was flashed into the granary, beaming here and there, and suddenly shooting up toward the roof.

He heard Bickmore say, "What's up there?"

THE VOICE that answered was Mountain Jim's, "Just a lot of plunder. Every rancher's granary is cluttered up with junk."

George was grateful for being classified as junk.

Bickmore said, "It should be in this bin right here if the girl wasn't lying. See if you can find it."

Mountain Jim climbed into the bin while Bickmore held the light.

Where was Tony Hart?

If the deputy hadn't gone he should have been just outside the door at that minute.

Presently Mountain Jim gave a grunt. "Here's something. Looks like a leather bag."

"Let me have it," Bickmore said peremptorily.

Mountain Jim must have passed the briefcase over for George heard Bickmore grunted with satisfaction.

"Find what you want?" the mountaineer asked.

"I surely did. Now you high-tail back there and tell my boys to carry out orders. After it's done you take 'em through the mountains to that railroad station we spoke about. You'll get the rest of your money there."

"I'd better, or you'll be short a couple boys," Mountain Jim threatened.

There was no doubt in George's mind what those orders were. It was to murder Henrietta Hodge and make sure that she never got a chance to tell what she knew. Bickmore would figure that George would keep quiet because talking would mean his arrest for murder.

Bickmore said, "Come on, let's get out of here."

He opened the door, and still there was no sign of Tony Hart!

George, who was struggling silently to suppress a sneeze, dropped silently into the oats, and straddled over the edge just as the sneeze could no longer be suppressed.

The men were twenty feet from the granary by then, and they had time to turn around before he reached the door. He heard Bickmore rip out an oath as he went for the gun in the shoulder holster. George had meant to order them to halt, but there was now no time to palaver.

Mountain Jim, although he carried a sixgun, was never without his more trusty rifle, and that, too, was coming up as he whirled.

Believing Mountain Jim to be the more dangerous man, George snapped a bullet low at him and leaped back and to the left. He had had no time to draw a bead, but his bullet broke the old man's bony leg just above the knee. Mountain Jim's rifle roared an instant after he was hit and his shot went wild. Bickmore's shot, a little more delayed, slammed into the granary door.

George swung back as the slugs from Bickmore's gun came in a steady stream. This time his aim was deliberate. One bullet missed him, another drew blood from his hand, and a third struck him heavily in the side as he pressed the trigger, but it didn't spoil his aim. The bullet struck Lee Bickmore squarely in the heart.

Mountain Jim, groaning in agony, was dragging at his sixgun. George aimed at the old man's hand and fired just as the gun cleared leather. The weapon fell from Mountain Jim's shattered hand.

Just then another man appeared running from the direction of the barnyard. George leaned weakly against the wall and leveled

his gun, but a moment before he fired the man yelled, "I'm the law!" It was Tony Hart.

George said angrily, "Where in hell have you been? I thought you were going to be just outside when they came out."

Hart said apologetically, "I fell asleep. It was the shots woke me up."

"A hell of a deputy sheriff you are," George said, and suddenly keeled over in the doorway.

FORTUNATELY, George didn't faint. He said, when Hart propped him up against the wall, "I heard them talk. Mountain Jim was to go back and tell those two gorillas to murder Miss Hodge and hide her body, then he was to guide them to safety across the mountains. If we don't get out there right away she'll be killed."

Hart answered, "You ain't going anywhere. You look shot full of holes to me."

The shooting had brought Pete Jensen and his wife running from the house. Hart ordered Jensen to get on a horse and ride for the doctor.

"Never mind me," George said, "but make Mountain Jim tell where Effie is and get out there with a posse."

"Mountain Jim ain't going nowhere," Hart said as he took all weapons from the old man's reach. "I've been waiting for years to put a rope around his damned skinny old neck, and now I've got him."

The deputy and Mrs. Jensen got George into the house, then went back for Mountain Jim. It wasn't the wounds that were giving George pain, but the thought that Effie might be murdered if Mountain Jim didn't get back within a specified time. He would have shot Tony Hart if he had had any idea it might make the man hurry. But Hart was a man who believed in taking his time.

Hart briefly examined the briefcase which was still clutched in Bickmore's dead hand. He said, "This is proof enough that he was out to destroy the evidence of a criminal conspiracy. And it's clear he had old Jim here hired to help commit a murder."

Mountain Jim ground out, "That's a lie. I wasn't to do the killin'. I told that cuss murderin' wimmin wasn't in my line."

"Well, if you want to escape the rope, you'll tell where that girl is, and everything else you know about Bickmore and his gang," Hart said grimly.

Although fuming with impatience over the lost time, and the knowledge that it would be physically impossible for him to take part in the rescue, George appreciated the fact that Mountain Jim's story would go a long way toward clearing both himself and Effie of murder charges—if the girl was still alive.

Bickmore and his boys had talked rather freely of how the crooked scale game was worked, and of how they had planned to destroy both George and Effie. Mountain Jim admitted that Bickmore had told him how Mac had been killed and buried. Finally he told where Effie was being held.

According to Mountain Jim he had easily located the girl's camp and watched one of the herders bring food to her. He had gone back after the others and surprising her had been simple indeed. He was full of contempt for the way in which she had tried to hide.

Covering their trail carefully, they had removed her to a brushy canyon some three miles from the camp. He admitted that he was supposed to be back at that camp by noon the next day with orders, but if he did not arrive before sundown the two gorillas were to dispose of the girl and then make their way to a railroad.

It was now dangerously near daybreak, and it would be long after noon before Hart could hope to reach the camp. If he had any trouble finding it, it might be after sundown. And there was always the danger that the two gangsters might get impatient and want to finish their job before then. The failure of Mountain Jim to return might make them panicky and hasten their departure.

SOMEHOW George's old wound had broken open and he was too weak from loss of blood to ride, even if the others had been willing to let him make the attempt.

It seemed to him that Tony Hart was needlessly slow getting started, yet the deputy was after the pertinent facts. Worse, he would have to stop in Antler to report to the sheriff and coroner and raise a posse, when every passing minute further endangered Effie's life.

It was almost worse after Hart had finally left. Dr. Beniger arrived presently and assured George that he was a lucky man. A little more to one side and he would have been a dead man.

"This time I want you to stay in bed if they have to tie you down," the doctor said firmly. He left eventually with stern orders for the others to keep an eye upon the patient at all times.

Little more than an hour after the doctor arrived Nesta rushed into the room flushed and breathless. "Oh, darling, I just heard from the doctor how you had been hurt. Why didn't you send for me right away?"

"I'm doing all right," George returned morosely.

"You will from now on, because I'm going to stay right here and take care of you," Nesta promised. "I know that awful girl out there is responsible for all this trouble."

George was too weak to argue or explain. "Just leave her out of it," he said angrily and tried to turn upon his side. He couldn't, and he let out a howl that was more from anger than from pain.

He would have felt much better had not Nesta kept fluttering and fussing over him, but at least it kept his mind partially off Effie's plight.

About the middle of the afternoon George became aware of some excitement outside. A moment later Nesta went outside to investigate, and when she returned her face was flushed.

"It's that terrible girl of yours," she said grimly. "She's actually coming here. Tony Hart is with her, so she must be under arrest for murder."

George almost bounded out of bed before she could stop him. "Glory hallelujah!" he exclaimed. He didn't know how Hart could have found her and returned so soon, but it was enough to know that she was safe.

Nesta said, "Well, I never!"

George had himself a little under control when Effie entered the room with Hart behind her. Over Hart's shoulder appeared the grinning face of Juan Batista.

Nesta said, "Tony Hart, what does this mean? Why isn't that girl in jail?"

"Don't worry," Hart assured her. "She is under arrest."

Disregarding Nesta, Effie walked over to the bed. "I thought you'd like to know that I'm all right, George," she said. "Mr. Hart was kind enough to let me come."

George reached for her hand, but she eluded him. "But those gangsters," he said. "How did you get away from them?"

"I owe that to Juan. You see, he was watching my camp when they came, and followed us. He went back and got Charley Bartlett and liberated me." She stepped back suddenly and kissed Juan on the mouth.

JUAN grinned. "Ees notheeng. We wait teel we catch thees hombres off guard. We say, 'Raise the han's an' don' turn around,' an' they comply nize."

"And right now they're roosting in the Antler jail, ready to sing their heads off," Tony Hart said. "I met Juan and Miss Hodge here bringing them in." His tone when he spoke of Miss Hodge was definitely respectful.

Nesta burst out. "I don't get this. You speak as if this murderess was a heroine, or something."

Tony Hart said, "In my book, she is."

"But she killed a man."

"Maybe she did, and maybe she didn't. But I've got plenty of evidence to prove that she was being attacked, and if she did fire the shot that killed Carpenter it was in self-defense. George killed a man, too, but I doubt if he'll even have to stand trial. If he does it'll be merely a preliminary and he'll be turned loose."

Effie said rather coldly, "And now that the explanations are over hadn't we better be getting started to that jail, Mr. Hart?"

"Not the jail," Hart said gallantly.

"Until they come for you you'll be lodging in my mother's house."

George was desperate. He cried out, "Effie, wait. There's something we've got to get settled."

She said, "I thought everything was taken care of."

"Except for one thing. Nesta, this'll be a shock to you, but I want out of our engagement. I'm in love with Effie. Whether she takes me or not I can't marry you after this."

Nesta had turned very pale. She said, "I don't think I've ever been so insulted in my life. Of course, George Kendrick, I wouldn't marry you now on a bet. But—" and her voice changed to a softer key—"we'll still be neighbors and, I hope, friends. All of us."

She bowed graciously toward Effie, who said. "You're a good sport, Miss Clegg, but I don't want your man. We both know George is sick and a little out of his head."

"In or out of it, I won't have him," Nesta declared. "And if I were you, Miss Hodge, I wouldn't either. Do you know what you'll be getting into? You'll be a sheep widow. Half the time or more he'll be out somewhere with a herd of sheep while you sit home and twiddle your thumbs."

Almost like a vision George saw the kind of life he had escaped with Nesta. She would have hounded him about staying home with her until he came to hate the place and she would have been a sheep widow indeed. At least he had that to be thankful for.

He looked up miserably into Effie's face, and she was laughing at him exactly as she had laughed when he was trying to get the herd across a creek. He knew suddenly that everything was going to be all right.

She bent over and whispered in his ear. "I can't take two proposals in one day. Wait till we both get out of jail and try again."

George couldn't help looking up quickly at Juan, who caught his glance and shrugged.

"*Mañana,* there will be other girls," Juan said.

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also

News of the latest Western movie hit

BRANDED

***with* ALAN LADD**

Not Much

He knew exactly what he was doing, this time

JAKE SEGREVE crested the last of the great central mountain passes and gazed without rancor upon California, which had remained traitorously Yankee and thereby had probably lost them the war.

It had been a good war, but it was over. There was no misery in Jake, nothing but a yeasty unrest that kept him eternally on the move without ever costing him a night's sleep. He gazed in awe at the towering pines, the snowy crags, the wheeling eagles, all of which seemed to answer something wildly yearning in him. He did not even notice the icy wind that tugged at his worn garments.

"It's a purty country," he observed reverently to the sore-backed horse he led, "but it's a fur piece from anywhere."

The horse stood spraddle-legged, its head down, showing by its exhaustion what an ordeal it had been through. It had almost played out, coming up the rugged eastern slope. So had the lean man's clothing. All that remained whole of Jake's Confederate uniform was a faded campaign

for Kissin'

By John Reese

ONE KIND OF WAR was over for Jake Segreve, and he didn't know but what the new war was much worse

hat. The rest of him was covered with rags.

A long rifle hung in a boot on his saddle. Around his waist, two gun-belts were crossed. Jake had tried peace a few months and he loved it, but he would have felt naked without these guns.

Jake had been nineteen when the war started, in April, 1861. It was now June, 1866. He was no longer an uncouth hill boy. In the army he had learned to read and write and cipher. He had been made captain, the only hill man to be commissioned in the history of his famous regiment. He had led men, and fed them, and bled them.

He favored his mother's people, and they were giants, but his six foot four frame had the lankness of his father's people thinned down to mere gristle by the eastern slope and the desert beyond. He kept his black hair cut short because of its tendency to a girlish wave. His black eyebrows met over steady black eyes. He wore a month's growth of curly brown beard. His hands were unusually large, but unlike the rest of his body they were restless, quick moving.

War had made him a hard, handy man and one who could cook, sew or tend the sick. It had made him lonely and restless, too.

This was what showed in his restless hands.

"Come on," he said gently, to the weary horse.

He began plodding down the mountain on foot, sparing the animal. Deer skipped boldly through the brush ahead of him. A huge bear, half as tall as Jake, lumbered insolently down the trail in plain sight for a while. Its fur had a yellowish, frosty cast. By the time Jake got his rifle out the bear had made a leisurely, contemptuous detour into the brush, but Jake knew he had seen a dreaded killer grizzly in its new spring coat.

"Man!" he whispered.

Noble game, but he was glad the bear had escaped. Somehow he knew how the bear felt—to be left alone, until it figured out what it wanted out of this rapidly civilizing world. Its wells of strength were no longer useful and its warrior ferocity was obsolete. Jake felt the same way. He understood its savage, questing loneliness.

He plodded on, leading his sore-backed horse. By the middle of the afternoon he was down where there were slopes instead of crags, twisted live oaks instead of high pines. He began to see cattle in the grassy parks between groves. Several times he had to mount his horse to save his life, when little long-horned bulls charged him.

The bulls were marked with a brand that ran the length of the whole left side, a long scar that sickened him with its cruelty. They were hardly little bulls, fleet and

strong and fierce, bred for these mountain meadows. It was a shame to torture them with that brand.

HE STRUCK a well-marked trail that soon became a pair of wheel ruts. Rounding a tall rock monument, he saw a big man spur his horse out of the timber and hold up his hand in the peace sign. Jake took his hands away from his pistols.

"That's more neighborly," the stranger said. "Soldier, ain't you? Looking for a job?"

His voice had a Southern softness but his dress was foreign. He had on black pants, fawnskin vest, red scarf, and a peaked black hat. Even his honest grey beard had an alien-looking trim. Jake shook his head.

"No. I aim to see the ocean. After that, I ain't figgered."

"Alabama boy, ain't ye?"

"Was."

"Thought so. I'm Louisiana myself. My name's Ned Strong. I been here since Fifty-two and it seems like a hundred years, every time I hear a voice from home. How air you called?"

"Jake Segreve." In afterthought, he added, "*Captain* Segreve."

"Captain, eh? It's a good job. Twelve dollars a month, American. Good grub, good beds, good horses to ride."

"For folks that mark their stock thataway?" Jake asked scornfully, pointing to a fleet little heifer that dashed out of the timber and down the trail at a dead run.

Ned Strong grinned. "Looks cruel to you, does it? It's the Spanish way and it's all the brand you'll see in three days' ride. That's the mark of Rancho Dos Tambors. Two Drum Ranch. You been on Drum range since the Divide. Seventy-four thousand acres that—"

"I wouldn't work for folks that burn an animal thataway."

More longhorns streamed out of the timber, heading down the slope. Behind them a dozen Mexicans came into view. Jake had to admire their horsemanship, but not the way they ran cattle.

"I don't want no job," he said, with finality.

Ned Strong's arm moved, and a little, double-barreled pistol appeared in his hand, centered unwaveringly on Jake's chest.

"Up with your hands, then, and don't try nothing with them guns. I don't never miss with this, ever."

Jake studied Ned's steady grey eye and changed his mind about chancing a fight. He was inwardly raging, but war had taught him self-control. Up went his hands.

"You'll rue this day," he said calmly.

Ned yelled something in Spanish. Two of the youngest Mexican riders wheeled and came galloping back. The rest followed the cattle. At a gesture from Ned, one of the Mexicans took Jake's guns.

"Now get on your horse, boy," Ned said. "I kep' these two because they don't talk American. It gets lonesome with nobody to talk to but Miz Butterworth. You're home folks."

"Fine way to treat home folks!" Jake said, mounting.

"I know. But Miz Butterworth is purely hard up for help."

"You won't get no work out'n me," Jake promised.

"I reckon we will. Git."

They started down the slope, Ned and Jake riding together, the two Mexican riders following.

"When you work for a woman," Ned said, "you do just about anything she needs done, boy. Miz Butterworth's a fine lady. She needs more American help. She wants to make the place pay, and it ain't paid in years.

"We'll meet her directly. You'll like her, and I don't want a boy from home to work like a common hand. You show her you ain't common. I'll introduce you as Captain Segreve. Titles mean a lot out here. She'll give you her hand to kiss, and then—"

"Kiss her hand?" Jake cried.

"Yes. Show her you got a gentleman's manners. You're a captain, ain't you?"

"Yes, but—" Jake gave up. This old

fool hadn't heard how wars went if they lasted long enough. The day of hand-kissing courtiers with military titles was long gone. "I reckon not," he snorted. "I was a fightin' captain. I'm not much for kissin'."

"All you do is kiss her hand, boy," Ned pleaded. "Manners is everything here. If you act like a common, ordinary farm boy, you'll git that kind of a job. If—"

"No," Jake said.

"Listen, boy. Here she comes now. You do as I tell you and everything will be all right," Ned said rapidly.

A BUGGY, pulled by a fast team, was galloping up the slope toward them with a reckless disregard of horse-flesh. A woman was driving it, a youngish woman with blue eyes and light hair and a face that might have been pretty, except for a certain haughty look that Jake recognized instantly. He remembered too well certain high-riding, high-headed Southern girls, planters' daughters, who had mocked his uncouth accent and crude manners. This look, and the woman's scandalous split skirt, put him on his guard.

She might have been twenty. Again, thirty might be closer, Jake had no way of knowing. Hard work had never marked her because she had never done any. Her small hands were white and soft, ornamented not only by a thick gold wedding ring but by a huge emerald. At her throat she wore a heavy diamond clasp. But more emblematic than jewels was that look, that high-headed aristocratic air.

"What's this, Ned?" she said, reining in.

She looked at Jake as though at a captive animal. Jake knew instantly that here was no Southern girl. He had fought too many New Englanders not to know their speech, and this was the last straw.

Off came Ned's peaked hat, with a flourish.

"A gentleman that might jine our crew, ma'am," he said. "I beg to present Captain Jake Segreve, of Alabama. Captain Segreve, Miz Butterworth, by her leave."

The woman's face changed instantly. "Captain Segreve? How charming!"

She put out her hand—but not to be shaken. Jake, his face flaming with deep, scalding indignation, looked over her head and sucked an eye-tooth, ignoring her hand.

In a moment she understood. Her eyes lost their cordial glow. They blazed. She let the hand fall. Her face became white and grim.

"Captain, is it?" she said harshly. "Another worthless, renegade rebel you mean, Ned. What do you mean, trying to palm off a hillbilly like this as an officer and a gentleman? Look at the poor horse he's riding! No gentleman would—"

"I was walkin' and leadin' when I met old whiskers, here," Jake cut in, "and it ain't half as mean as the way you brand cows, and no woman that wears pants can learn me anything about manners."

"Sir!" White-faced and furious, she turned to Ned, brandishing her buggy whip. "Shame, shame! Take this oaf in the buggy and give me your horse. Turn that poor animal loose."

"Yes, ma'am!" Ned said, dismounting hastily.

"You aim to lose my horse?" Jake squalled.

He launched himself at Ned Strong from the saddle. He hit the old man with his shoulder and they went down together. The buggy team danced. Out of the corner of his eye, Jake saw the woman raise her whip.

He still did not believe it when the lash curled across his shoulders, splitting his sun-rotted shirt. The cut burned deep. He slammed Ned against the ground, choking with killing rage, and the whip curled around his back again.

He had his hand inside Ned's shirt, almost on the little double-barreled pistol, when the two Mexicans jumped him from behind. One of his own guns came down on the top of his head. His old campaign hat saved him, and he never did lose consciousness, but he could not resist as they lifted him into the buggy and tied his hands behind him.

NOTHING that had happened in the war—neither the loss of battles nor of friends nor surrender itself—had shamed him like this. He felt like an animal, or a runaway slave taken by professional slave-catchers.

Ned unsaddled Jake's horse, threw the saddle and bridle in the buggy. Jake's horse shambled away—free, but prey to the first grizzly it met. Ned adjusted his own stirrups to the woman and gave her his hand into the saddle.

From this height, she studied Jake contemptuously, eyes still blazing. Jake's shirt had been ripped half off. Without shame she surveyed his broad, hairy chest and exposed musculature.

"He's strong enough, no doubt," she said trembling. "Find some good, hard work for him and lock him up until he's ready to make a hand. Captain Segreve, indeed!"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm plumb sorry, ma'am," Ned said.

"You'll rue the day," Jake promised her. "I'll cut somebody's heart out for this."

She tossed her head, touched spur to the horse, and went galloping down the slope. She could ride, but so could the planters' daughters. And not even a bold hussy, such as many of the planters' girls had become, would wear a skirt that was practically breeches.

"Now you done it!" Ned said. "I'll turn your hands loose if you'll give me your parole."

"No."

"All right." Ned turned to the Mexicans and spoke in Spanish, and they galloped away. Ned turned the team down the slope. "You shore fixed things!" he sighed. "You should have listened. It don't do no good to fight. Miz Butterworth's husband's grand-daddy's daddy was a king's grantee."

"My great-granddaddy helped whup one king."

"Not the same one. You don't know what it means here."

Jake snarled, "She wears pants!"

"This is California, boy. An ol' Alabama boy like you ought to keep his trap shut and his ears open until he learns. The Spaniards knowed how to live! The trash sifted to the bottom, them with nerve and brains and strength—and manners—rose to the top. Me, I'm halfway between. I worked for Miz Butterworth's daddy, old Jabez Butterworth, when she was a baby."

Jake sat there shaking his head as Ned told him the fantastic tale of how they did things here. One thing puzzled him—her name was Mrs. Butterworth. Yet her father had been a Butterworth, too. How did a married woman keep her father's name?

RANCHO Dos Tambors, Ned said, had been granted to Don Luis Acevideo by the King of Spain in 1778. Over it and its inhabitants Don Luis had the power of life and death. He spoke with the voice of the king himself, and beside this king, George III of England was an easy-going joker.

"Take a long time to get over habits like that," Ned said. "We're a state now, but mostly the American authorities let us alone, let Miz Butterworth run things her way. There ain't no sheriff going to care how long she keeps you locked up."

"No!"

"Yes. Her pa kep' a man locked up a year and a half once."

Jabez Butterworth, Ned said, had come 'round the Horn in a hide ship, sending back to Boston for his bride after buying part of Dos Tambors from an impecunious Acevideo. Little by little he bought more land, until at his death ten years ago he had left fully half of the original king's grant to his only child, Ellen.

Then Ellen married Bautista Acevideo, last of the line, reuniting the two properties. She became their sole owner when her husband died less than a year later.

"You mean *he* changed *his* name, instead of her, when they got married?" Jake cried as the incredible light dawned.

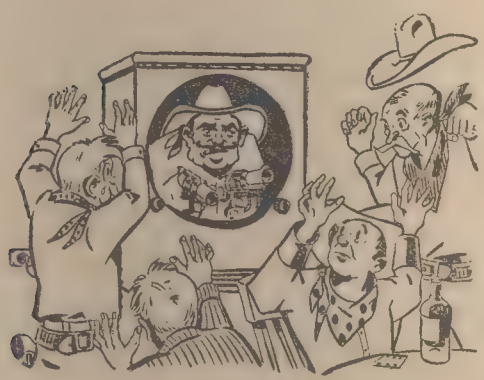
"The Spanish way is to use both the husband and the wife's names. Usually the husband's comes first, but Ellen wouldn't stand for that."

"I declare! What she needs is a strong hand."

Ned chuckled. "That'd tickle her—if she didn't have you whupped with a rope for impudence. Here's the place. It was Acevideo for a hundred years, but it's all Butterworth now."

It was a town, rather than a ranch. There was a street down the middle, with a huge, rambling adobe house set in an oak grove on the left. On the right side were sheds, shops, granaries and corrals, and dozens of little thatched houses for the Mexican hands.

The buggy stopped before a long, low,



thick-walled adobe building with a roof of heavy redwood shakes.

"Juan!" Ned bawled. "Come out here!"

A fat Mexican wearing an apron waddled out. The Mexicans Jake had seen before were pleasant-looking, handsome fellows.

This one had small, cold eyes set in a flat, pockmarked face.

"Lock him up, untie him and feed him, Juan," Ned said. "The Senora will want to talk to him later."

"*Si,* Senor Ned. This way, you."

Jake jumped out of the buggy—no mean feat, with his hands still tied behind him. Juan lifted his apron to let Jake see the haft of the big butcher-knife in his belt.

"Go ahead. I will use thees," Juan said softly.

"Shore." Jake shivered. How he hated cold steel!

He went into the cool, dark building. The first room was a huge storeroom. Bags of flour, beans and rice were stacked high, and from the ceiling beams hung rows of dried red-peppers. There were buckets of lard and sorghum, kegs of rum and wine, chests and cases of all kinds, huge bales of clothing.

Juan pointed to another door, smiling, and Jake went ahead of him into a small, dark room. He felt Juan's knife snick through the thong that bound his wrists, and his hands tingled as the circulation came back into them. The door closed, and he heard its heavy oaken bars drop.

When his eyes got used to the darkness he saw he was in a windowless cell not more than ten feet square. The walls and floor were of hard-packed, impenetrable adobe. There was a straw mattress in the corner, no other furniture.

The only light came from the gap between the roof beams, which were long poles set close together and anchored in the adobe, with the thick redwood shakes pegged on top of them. It was almost evening, and the musty cell was dark and lonely. Through the thick door came the sound of Juan shuffling back and forth among his bags and bales and buckets. Evidently he was a favored retainer, storekeeper as well as jailer. Jake hated him instinctively. Now that he understood Juan's status, he hated him still more.

He shook out the mattress, lay down on it, and slept like a baby for an hour. War had taught him to bide his time and take care of his body.

The grating of the door awakened him and he sat up. Juan came in first, a steaming stewpot in one hand, a candle and a heavy iron spoon in the other. Behind him came Ned Strong and Miz Butterworth.

JUAN set the pot down and tossed the spoon to Jake. Jake moved aside and let it clang on the hard floor. He was not too proud to eat, just too proud to be eager.

"You don't have to eat," the woman said sharply. "You'd better be sensible, Segreve. No one cares if you starve."

"*Captain* Segreve," he corrected her.

"There'll be none of your airs around here!"

"Let me talk to him, ma'am," Ned said. "The sooner he comes to his senses the sooner we get some use out of him."

"I don't care," she said wearily, shrugging her shoulders.

She went out. Juan handed Ned the candle and followed her. Jake fumbled on the floor for the heavy iron spoon.

"Don't try it," Ned warned. "I sleep with this gun." He patted his chest.

"I was just going to eat."

"That's sensible! I wish you'd show more sense, though. You had your spite out. Miz Butterworth's hot-headed, but she don't hold grudges. She likes a man with spunk. If you'd just beg her pardon—"

A roar of anguish interrupted him. Jake had spooned out a big bite of the stew, and had swallowed some before he managed to spit the rest out. He clawed at his burning mouth.

"Water!" he choked.

"You'll get used to it," Ned said unsympathetically. "It's the chili. All right, I'll bring you a drink.

He went out and came back with a quart measure of water. Jake gulped part of it, saving the rest to wash down the chili. He had to eat, red-pepper or not. He was too seasoned a forager to deny his body food. It didn't taste bad, once the heat numbed his mouth, but it was the final indignity. Not even savages treated prisoners this way!

He refused to argue with Ned, and Ned gave up and went out. Jake finished the stew. He sat down on his straw mattress and waited an hour.

By then, all was quiet outside. There would be a quarter moon tonight. He was rested and fed. There was no use putting up with this foolishness any longer.

He squatted, gathering his long, powerful legs under him. He jumped, and on the third try got a hand-hold on one of the roof poles. He swung there on one hand until his other hand found its grip.

He lifted his feet against another pole, arched his back downward, and straightened his legs. The two poles bowed, with little cracking reports like small pistol shots. The whip-marks burned tormentingly as his muscles tightened under them.

SUDDENLY one pole broke free of its adobe anchor. A few shakes fell inward, and Jake dropped to the floor to rest. When he was rested he jumped, found his old handhold and foothold, and pushed again.

The gap in the roof widened. More shakes fell. He kicked others free, until there was a hole big enough to swing his body through. He hooked his legs over the top of the wall and lifted himself to a sitting position. He sat there smiling, panting slightly, pleased with the way things were going. The cell had been designed for shorter men with half his strength. They had never met a man like Captain Jake Segreve.

A dog began barking and Jake was content to wait and rest knowing to a split-second how long it took for an alarm to travel through sleepy men. At the right moment he dropped to the ground, brandishing one of the heavy poles. "Begone!"

The dog went yelping away. Silence closed down again. Jake was free, except that he was still in the middle of Rancho Dos Tambor's seventy-four thousand acres. The first thing was to make sure of his getaway. He smiled again, thinking of the sore-backed horse he had forfeited.

He had marked in his mind where the horse corrals were. Keeping to the shadows, he went to them and picked out a likely-looking horse, from a dozen fine ones. He saddled and bridled it and tied it in the deep shadows of the storehouse, near the road. The rest of the horses he sent galloping out of the back gate toward the hills.

Still there was no alarm. A century of autocratic security had made Dos Tambors vulnerable to a hard-bitten veteran like Jake.

There were bars on the storehouse windows, but these, too, had been designed against shorter, weaker marauders. He wrenched them easily from their sockets and wriggled through the small windows.

The first thing he did was to dress himself. The blue silk shirts were made for smaller men, but he found one that fit him like a glove. The black wool pants were all too short and too tight, but they were warm. He found a fine pair of boots and a tall-crowned black hat.

Now, except for his towering size, no one could tell him in the dark from these Mexicans. He chuckled at the outlandish picture he would present to anyone who knew him, as, with a sharp knife, he slashed and ruined every other piece of clothing stored here.

A dozen new axes, wired together in a bale, leaned in one corner. He wrenched one free and tested its blade. It wouldn't pass for sharp back home, but it would do.

He started with the stacked bags, chopping from the roof down, letting beans, flour and rice mount in an indiscriminate heap on the floor The buckets of lard and sorghum, the kegs of rum and wine, made a little more noise, but Jake was an artist with an ax. He tramped the liquids well into the pile, making sure they blended into a useless mess.

He took special pleasure in pulling down the strings of chili peppers and grinding them underfoot. It took him less than forty minutes to wreck the stores, because he was a well-trained, methodical wrecker.

He let himself out the front door and for the next hour cut a zig-zag path of havoc across sleeping Rancho Dos Tambors. Not a soul stirred. Even the dogs had lost their guardsman's instinct in the years of Acevideo rule.

In the big carriage shed were several buggies and wagons and one huge, old-fashioned coach. He chopped out the wheels, knowing them to be irreplaceable. On the coach door was a gilded emblem which he took to be the Acevideo arms. An ax stroke erased them forever.

In the smithy, he overturned the forge, emptied bags of charcoal, and chopped holes in the leather bellows. In the granary he had luck. The big redwood water tank that supplied the whole establishment stood on pillars over the grain bins, and one stroke of the ax sent the water supply cascading through the grain.

In the harness shed, he chopped harnesses into three-inch scraps of leather. He found the chicken house by scent, and with the larcenous skill of an old Confederate lifted the chickens off the roost without raising a squawk. He chopped their heads off and piled the carcasses neatly outside.

Lastly, he set fire to the big barn. Jake had burned many a barn, and he knew how to set a fire that would smolder a long time, thus escaping detection, and then blaze up furiously in a dozen places. While they fought that fire they would be too busy to pursue him.

IT WOULD be a long, long time before Rancho Dos Tambors and its arrogant New England owner forgot Jake Segreve! They would think twice before jailing another man like Jake. The whip-marks no longer smarted. The silk shirt had a wonderful soothing effect.

He untied the horse and led it cautiously out into the street. A yellow light twinkled suddenly in the big adobe house. A shapely figure crossed the small square window.

Jake, his heart pounding strangely, led his horse across the street and tied it in the bushes under the oaks. He groped his way through shadows toward the house, to where he could look in the window.

It opened on Ellen Butterworth's bedroom. She was in a long nightgown, nothing else. It was cut exceedingly low at the top, and under it her bare feet looked oddly like white pigeons.

Jake stared, the yeasty ferment in him suddenly surging to the boiling point. Beside her bed was a small table, covered with books and papers. Apparently the queen of Dos Tambors had to work far, far into the night, long after her people were asleep. Jake, who had commanded men, under-

stood how this could be. It gave him an entirely new point of view. He remembered keenly the loneliness of command, the awful responsibility of leading men, feeding them, bleeding them. Many a good officer became haughty and bad-tempered, like Ellen Butterworth, under the weight of command.

"The pore little thing!" he murmured, in sudden pity, scratching his itching whip-marks as though they were no more than insect bites.

She took a flowered gown from a nail and put it across her shoulders. It was a filmy thing of embroidered silk, as flimsy as the nightgown, but its cost would have fed Jake's whole company for the last six months of the war.

She vanished from his view, and Jake stepped back into the bushes, suddenly confused and lonely, his cool calm shattered forever. Somehow the grizzly bear he had seen that morning came to mind, and he pitied it, too. Its savage, lonely quest would never end. Its war went on forever. For himself, Jake realized, war was over, and he knew now what he wanted.

A door opened. She came across the dark *galleria* like a ghost, her bare feet making no sound on the tiles. She clutched the filmy robe together at the waist, and when she emerged from the shadows of the *galleria's* roof, the moonlight glinted on the dull gold of her wedding band, all that remained of the evanescent line of the Acevideos.

SHE CAME through the bushes and walked straight into his arms. It was not vengeance, but just something five years of war had failed to teach him, that made him do what he did. It was as instinctive as the action of a grizzly bear.

His long arms closed powerfully about her slender waist. He picked her up, so that the moon caught both their faces in one patch of light. He smelled the fragrance of her hair and saw the primitive fright in her eyes. She recognized him.

"Segreve! Help, help, help!" she screamed.

He knew he ought to run. Instead, he kissed her. It was the first time he had ever kissed a woman, but he silenced her with his lips like an old campaigner at this kissing business. He kissed her as her dead husband never had, because he was born to command and could never be the man to change his name to his wife's at marriage.

After that first startled scream, she was too proud to show fright. She fought, but Jake was used to taking what he wanted. War had its gallantries, but deeper than gallantry went the forager's instinct, the grizzly's demanding savagery. If he died tomorrow or if he lived to be a hundred, there would never be another time like this.

He kissed her again and again, muttering, "Lord, you're sweet, Lord, how sweet you are, Lord, what a sweet woman!" Her lips were cool and moist but her breath was warm. For a moment, it seemed to him that she responded, not weakly, but as one strong nature to another. He felt her hands close firmly on his arms, and when next he kissed her there was firmness and heat in her lips.

Then someone shrieked across the street —Juan, aroused by the fire. Apparently in the next breath he discovered the horrible wreckage of his stores. Again and again his shrieks rang out. Sleepy voices yelled in the little thatched houses. Dogs began barking belatedly. Men ran out. Women screamed as the big barn bloomed in an instantaneous rosy glow that filled the sky.

Jake remembered his saddled horse, and the urgent need to be on his way. In seconds they would be closing in on him. The woman lay limp in his arms, her hands resting lightly against his chest, her lips parted, her eyes closed. He set her down on her bare feet and stepped back.

Her eyes opened. She swayed, shivered, closed the silk robe about her softness. Her eyes searched his in the moonlight.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he whispered, taking off his tall-crowned, stolen hat. "I reckon you'll think I'm purty low-down."

It was the wrong thing to say. He realized instantly that the grizzly bear should

never apologize to a Butterworth. The old, haughty look came into her face, making it older, colder.

"You insolent hillbilly," she hissed between her teeth. "I'll have you flogged within an inch of your life for this!"

They were running across the street now, but he still had a chance. His hand was already groping with the knotted reins. But he let go of them as the old, smoking resentment blazed in him again. The horse ran, taking with it his chance of freedom. But a grizzly bear fought back when it could have escaped, sometimes.

His big hand closed around her wrist, and the woman who had survived the whole blue-blooded Acevideo line was too proud to resist.

"Come here, you," he said. "You want your hand kissed. I'll kiss you, all right. This one's fur whuppin' me. This one's fur lockin' me up. This one's fur the name you called me. This one—"

He knew exactly what he was doing, this time. It pleased him when sheer, feminine panic came into her eyes. She kicked and screamed and scratched, and then she begged and pleaded and coaxed. There was nothing holy in these kisses. He made them burn and cut like a buggy whip.

"I'll show you how a captain kisses! Why you ain't never met a man like me. You ain't wearin' pants now, woman."

They hit him from behind, a dozen strong. Jake fought with the silent ferocity of a cornered grizzly. He pushed Ellen Butterworth aside and let them come at him. It was a pleasure to fight, to give hurt and take hurt. He dragged them out into the middle of the street, where the light from the burning barn just suited his style of fighting.

He fought for the sheer joy of it, and it was all the more joyful because it followed kissing.

The woman screamed. He whirled in time to see Juan shuffling toward him, the knife twinkling in his hand. Jake had one man by the hair, another by the neck. He slammed the two heads together and let them fall.

He reached for Juan's arm, taking the point of the knife and feeling it grate along the bone of his forearm. There was no pain—yet. He got his grip and twisted. The bone in Juan's wrist snapped. Juan screamed. The knife clattered to the ground. Jake kicked it, and the bright blade spun in shining circles down the road.

Jake's hand was slippery with his own blood, but he fought on, getting lightheaded as his blood ran out. The last thing he remembered was standing there in the middle of the road with his legs wide apart to hold his balance. The woman was walking toward him. She said something in Spanish, a harsh, strident voice. The man who was coming at Jake dropped his club.

She was still moving toward him, clutching the robe together at her waist, when he toppled forward into a black void of darkness.

HE AWAKENED with a throbbing head, but Jake had been wounded before, and he knew this came only from loss of blood. He lay there with his eyes closed for a moment. When he tried to move the fingers of his right hand, he felt the pull of stitches in his arm. A voice chided him in rapid Spanish.

"He says don't move your fingers, or you'll open the wound again. Let it heal," came Ned Strong's voice.

Jake turned his head. Ned was leaning against the far wall, chewing on a twig. A Mexican doctor was bathing his hands in a basin at the foot of the bed. It was a soft bed, in a big, pleasant room. The nails along the walls were filled with filmy feminine garments.

"Git me out of here!" he said thickly, realizing it was her bed, her room.

The doctor spoke again in Spanish.

"He says lay still," Ned Strong said. "You'll be all right in a few days. Miz Butterworth said to call her as soon as you was awake, Colonel."

"Captain," Jake said. "Not Colonel—Captain."

Ned studied him gravely.

"I see you still don't know the measure of the Butterworths. D'you think a triflin' captain is good enough for Miz Ellen? The Butterworths take what they want, boy. She said to call her when you woke up."

"Don't let her in here!"

"She said to call her when you woke up, Colonel," Ned said stubbornly.

He went out. Jake lay back and closed his eyes, remembering that Ned had called her Miz Ellen, not Miz Butterworth. Ned was a wise old man, past amazement at anything a Butterworth ordered. Jake had a feeling the end of his quest was at hand.

"Now will you kiss my hand?" came a soft but imperious voice.

He looked up at her. She was standing at his bedside, still dressed in the embroidered silk robe. He had already seen two Ellen Butterworths—one young and soft and warm and lonely, one old and hard and proud and cold.

This was a combination of the two. The pride was still there, but it was not the kind that looked down on him, but rather a strength to match his strength, a will to match the one that had enabled an uncouth hill boy to rise to a commission in a hard pressed, hard fighting army. He took what he wanted. So did she. She had met her match, but so had Jake Segreve.

"Miz Ellen, I present Colonel Segreve," Ned Strong said. "Jake, by her leave, Miz Ellen Butterworth."

She put her hand down to his lips. It was her left one, and Jake saw she had removed from it the gold band of the extinct Acevideos.

He raised his lips to it proudly.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," he said.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. In proportion to the animal's size, which has a larger hoof, horse or mule?

2. Old trees along the Texas Gulf Coast lean a little to the north. Why?

3. What are the three most essential items of riding equipment—besides the horse?

4. With nothing but ponderosa pine and white fir (sometimes called balsam) trees handy to his diggings, which would the prospector choose as more durable for cabin logs?

5. Capitan Peak, 9,500 feet in altitude, located in Culberson County, is the highest point in what state?

6. The mountains around my home are pocked with the holes blasted out by old prospectors looking for gold, which they didn't find. They were looking in the right kind of rock, however—a hard, white stone showing crystalline structure when broken. Name this stone.

7. What is the most noticeable difference between a cow's tail and a horse's tail?

8. Relics of two famous writers, Bret Harte's old stone store and Mark Twain's cabin on Jackass Hill, are located at Tuttletown, in what state?

9. What does a cowboy mean when he says a horse is grassy?

10. Old-time cowboys gave picturesque names to these brands. Can you figger out what they might be? (1)

(2)

(3)

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 119. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

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1. . . . form a cushion between your plate and gums to eliminate the friction that makes gums sore and raw.
2. . . . hold shallow lowers, despite lack of suction.
3. . . . seal the edges of plates so food particles can't get underneath to cause irritation.
4. . . . enable you to eat hard-to-chew foods in comfort, like steak, apples, celery, even corn-on-the-cob.
5. . . . give you full confidence to laugh, talk, sing without fear of embarrassment due to slipping plates.
6. hold plates tight even during strenuous sessions of coughing or sneezing.

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M. E. K., Somerville, Mass.

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Mrs. W. J. A., Waltham, Mass.

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Happy Days

By Roberta Childers

The true story of a woman who wanted only freedom and worked hard for it

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HAPPY DAYS was a miner, a prospector, a builder. Yes, Alice Diminy Jester was a career woman. Her life was spent trying to achieve that happy state to which she had been elected by nickname, and I would say she succeeded.

Happy Days was born in Bavaria ninety-eight years ago. It was her father who moulded the pattern of her life.

"Alice," he said, "never work for anyone. That is slavery. Work always for yourself, no matter how hard you find it."

And Happy Days did, though the going often got a little rough. Happy Days sought her work in Poland, France, Egypt, New York, Louisiana. In Louisiana she opened a restaurant and was doing well when she contracted malaria. It took her last dime.

When she was at last released from the hospital she spent her time convalescing near the banks of the Mississippi. She stood there one day, and she talked to a

man with a pack on his back. He was going out West. She decided then and there he had the life she wanted.

She went home, and when she was well enough she packed her own little bundle and probably was the first woman hitch-hiker to hoof it West. She settled in San Francisco, and the day she had earned enough to furnish and move into a little apartment came the earthquake. She lost everything in the great fire.

Nothing daunted, she hooked a ride by freight team into Tonopah, Nevada, then in the throes of a great silver boom. Not liking Tonopah, she tried Goldfield, and finally ended up in Rhyolite across from the now famous bottle-house. Then its mud and bottle construction was considered a poor man's makeshift.

Here Alice again started a restaurant with a canny eye to business. She cut prices (which were outlandish) and served better meals, even including butter. On the very first day she gave a bum a meal. He extolled the restaurant's virtues up and down the street, rolling his eyes, rubbing his stomach and murmuring, "Happy Days." And so it became "Happy Days' Place" and Alice "Happy Days." She liked the name because it reflected the feeling she had for life.

She made good money, and one day the boom was over. She moved into the old town of Lida and grubstaked a man who found the claims that later comprised her Isle of Peace. "Isle of Peace" she named it, wrested as it was from the bitter desert by brute force, for here she at last gained freedom.

She moved out to her claim, sleeping on the ground and fighting rattlers and cooking on a shovel. And the dirt they panned was gold.

But panning gold is slow, and she and her partner built a crude little rocker into one end of which they shoveled the muck. The water washed slowly over it, and as the gold sifted loose, it was caught in the riffles of the rocker. They brought the water laboriously down from the spring through wooden troughs. Using a windlass and bucket, they dug the sand to bed rock.

Later her partner dropped out, but she stayed on. She built a house, packing in the boards herself. Claimjumpers, eager to run her off, burned it down. She strapped a gun on her waist, and she slept in the cellar, and she built it again.

Claimjumpers forever plagued her. They knew there was a rich ledge somewhere from which the panning ore had washed. But Happy Days never found it. Year in and year out she panned her living.

SHE WALKED to Goldfield sixty-five miles away, leading two burros for supplies. She tied a pillow on her head to avoid sunstroke and slept out one night of each journey at Jackson Mountain, her halfway mark. The kids in town followed her up and down the streets as they might have followed Santa Claus.

In later years she had an old jaloppy as elastically built as she was, to drive down the rough old road through the winding canyons and across the alkali flats and up the summits into Goldfield.

She acquired a nanny goat which she milked. She had to keep the goat tied in the yard because of the coyotes. Winters always found her snowed in, but never unprepared. She kept well-stocked with provisions, for winter in the hills comes suddenly and the deep canyons will hold impassable drifts of snow.

She also acquired a radio and kept up with the world. She read a great deal and was well posted on current affairs.

But through all the years her medium of exchange never altered. It was little bags of placer gold. The assay office to which she always took the gold for sale classed it as "Tule Canyon Gold," which signified it was worth only $14 an ounce, instead of the then current price of $20. This was due to the fact that the Tule Canyon Region placer gold was heavy with silver, which carried the weight but not the value.

At seventy or thereabouts she got married to Herbert Jester, and twenty years later she got divorced. She didn't see any sense in living the rest of her life with a man she no longer cherished.

At eight-five she hitch hiked to New

York on business, and appeared on the radio.

About this time she got fouled up on a law expressly designed to protect people like her. Mining laws provide for two classes of claims. One is the U.S. Patented Claim. It costs several hundred dollars to get a claim patented, but the owner can hold it to the end of time if he pays his county taxes on it. Happy never got rich enough to patent her claim.

The other claims, unpatented, are not taxed. Each year $100 of assessment (development) work must be done on each claim and notice that it has been so done filed at the county seat. Unless this is taken care of, the claim reverts to "open ground" and may be staked by anyone. During the depression years, however, the required assessment work was suspended, providing that the claim owner filed with the county recorder notice that he was taking advantage of the law.

Happy Days didn't get this done, and ever-watchful men jumped her claims. When she discovered them and their stake marks, she broke all the windows in their car in a fit of fury. They came in to town and swore out an insanity charge.

The whole town turned out the day of the hearing. Happy Days was sharp and acid and sane, the doctors said, at which everybody cheered. Then they cheered again when the judge said she would be given a chance to reclaim her property.

At last, old age sort of caught up with her, and she had to sell the claims. After a short stay in the hospital, she went to San Francisco, where she told fortunes in a cheap hotel to make her living.

I don't know what became of Happy Days after that. Perhaps she is living. Perhaps somewhere her vibrant voice is singing the Bavarian songs she loved so well.

But if she is dead, then I can only hope that somehow, sometime her body will come home to rest under the low cliff where she wanted to be, above the little cleared patch in the billowing hills of sage —her beloved Isle of Peace.

Coming Up in the Next Issue

The Wildcatter

Tracy Mason Was a Girl Who Thought She Wanted Revenge but Yearned for Love

A Magazine-Length Novel

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Home to Rafter C

He Wondered If She'd Be Married by Now, the Blonde Girl on the Blaze-Faced Black

A Magazine-Length Novel

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

Open Verdict

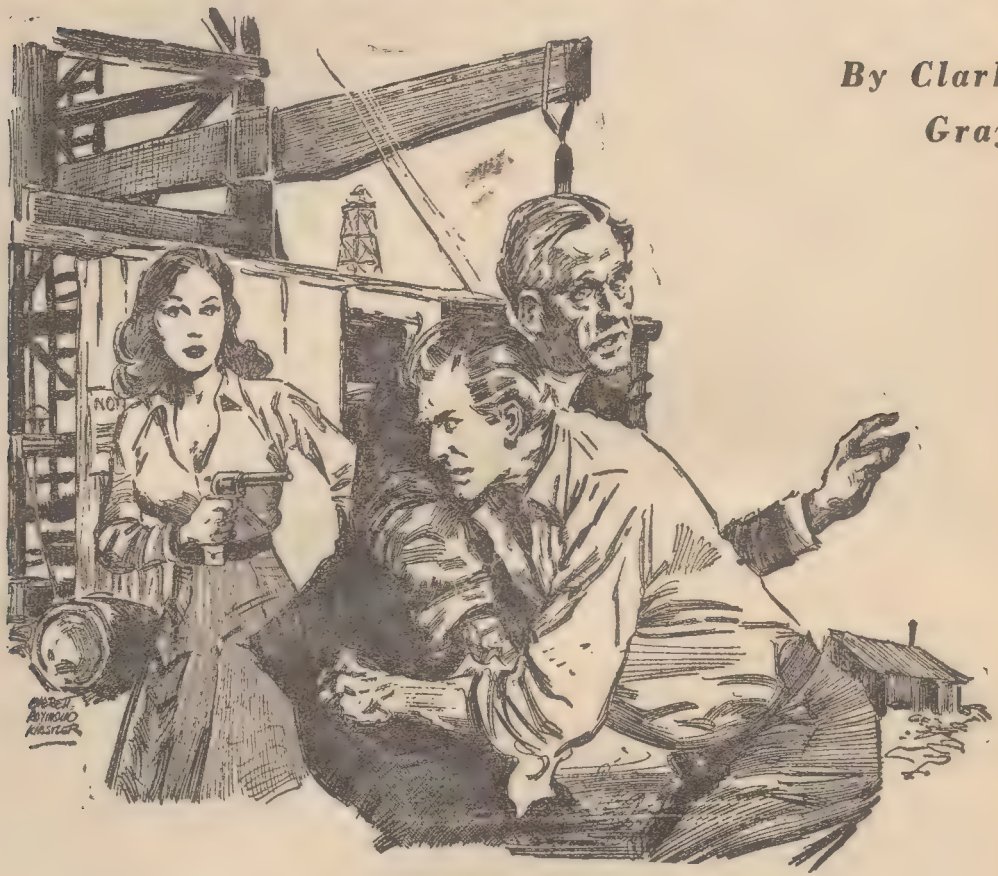
There Were Too Many Confessions to the Murder of Nash Oliver of Lobo Springs

An Outstanding Short Story

By BENNETT FOSTER

Girl With the .38

By Clark Gray



BOB MANSFIELD knew how to use women in business as well as in love

IN SPITE of his twenty-nine years Bob Mansfield was an experienced oil well driller. So he had known he was taking a certain risk when he failed to case the water sand in the wildcat well he was drilling with Mark Bedford.

Normally Mansfield wouldn't have done it, for he was reasonably honest. But this time he had no choice because Bedford was putting up the money, and Bedford was the boss. Besides that, a man will take a lot of chances for a million dollars.

So Mansfield had run the risk, and two weeks later he knew that he had lost when he saw the horseman appear over the lip of the horizon, where Texas sagebrush waved greenish-purple against the sky. In the sunlight, the horseman was a black, slight figure astride a roan horse.

Mansfield had been standing by the drilling line. He remained there, with his hand on the thick cable, his elbow working up and down to the sweep of the walking beam. Above and around him the rig was sighing and squealing and swaying in all the cacophony of the machinery that was

so familiar he was scarcely aware of it. Mansfield was a big enough man, but standing there on the derrick floor he looked like a fly trapped in the midst of a shining network of steel and glistening cable. Presently he determined that the horseman was a woman.

The woman reined in her roan horse some ten feet from the derrick and examined Mansfield curiously. Even from this distance he caught the acrid sweat smell of the horse. It was a smell Mansfield hated. Frowning, he lifted his hand and let out the temper screw a turn or so, then stepped down the three steps of the derrick floor to the ground. He did not like this kind of trouble and he did not like to mix women with business.

"Ma'am?"

She was a blonde in a Stetson hat, faded blue pants tucked into scarred high-heeled boots, and a gray shirt, open at the neck. She was young and a little scared, a girl, really, instead of a woman. She was trying hard to look businesslike.

"Can I have a word with you?" The girl pitched her voice to carry over the clatter of the drilling rig. "Away from this racket, if you please."

Mansfield wiped grease off his face with the sleeve of his overalls. Even aside from the trouble her coming suggested he regarded her with disfavor because her presence here violated his sense of the proprieties. He liked his life kept in tidy compartments. In one compartment was the oil business, a tough dirty exciting game where a man could make a million dollars or lose his life at the snap of a broken cable. The oil business held no place for women of any kind.

Women belonged in the other compartment, along with barrooms and Saturday nights and a clean shirt and a bankroll in his pocket. Especially Texas women. Mansfield hadn't been in Texas long, but long enough to have learned that many of the girls had lonesome, eager ways. Maybe it was the God-awful emptiness of the country, he didn't know. But he did know that the lonesomeness of the women was the one thing he liked about Texas, and this girl seemed a good example of it. Mansfield grinned.

"You the surface owner?"

She flushed under his steady gaze. "Yes. This is my ranch." She lifted a slender hand to her throat, buttoning her shirt a notch higher.

The flush had no particular significance to Mansfield. But the buttoning of her shirt told him all about her. So she was one of the nice girls, he thought, one of those who had stars in her eyes and an ivy-covered cottage in her head. Therefore she was not the kind of girl for Bob Mansfield. He nodded curtly.

"Be with you in a second."

TURNING, he remounted the derrick floor, ducked under the walking beam, passed the band wheel and crossed the narrow catwalk to the engine house. He entered the engine house and shut the door carefully behind him, a tall man in his greasy overalls and tin hat and driller's boots.

Mark Bedford was playing a game of solitaire on a table set beside the big steam engine. Mark looked up with a sigh.

"It's happened," Mansfield told Mark mildly. "I warned you we ought to case off that water sand. Now we got the surface owner out there, and a woman at that! Damn it, Mark, you know women make trouble around an oil rig!"

Mark Bedford laid down his cards in a gesture of annoyance. Bedford, too, wore overalls, but he also had on a necktie. His thinning thatch of white hair was carefully brushed. He was a heavy man of about fifty with a wide, ugly face.

"You mean Edwina White?"

Mansfield shrugged. "She said she owned this ranch."

"That's Edwina." Mark Bedford pushed to his feet and went to peer nervously out the window. Mansfield watched the man curiously, wondering what he would do now. Mansfield did not like Mark Bedford, had never liked him. He watched Bedford's fists clench at his sides as the man stared out the window.

Bedford had a pair of white cotton gloves

in his hip pockets; he used the gloves to protect his hands when he worked around the rig, which wasn't often. Bedford was an oil promoter by profession. He did only enough work to relieve Mansfield of the necessity of hiring a tool dresser.

Mansfield spoke wryly to Bedford's back. "You've kept too big a chunk of this one, Mark. If you'd sold a little more stock—enough so I could have hired a tool dresser and cased the well right—this wouldn't have happened. You've pinched the pennies too tight."

Mark Bedford whirled irritably. "Did I ask your advice? I'll do the promoting, Mansfield. You stick to drilling."

Mansfield put his boot on the bench where Bedford had been sitting. His eyes were a little hard. "Mark, I sure played hell when I let you talk me into coming to Texas."

"Oh, you did?" Mark Bedford snapped. "Listen, Mansfield, most drillers would have jumped at the chance to sink this well for an eighth interest. Damn it, man, don't be a fool! You like money. You can recognize an anticline as well as anybody."

Mansfield nodded. "I can recognize trouble, too. That's what we've got now."

"Take your boot off my bench," Mark Bedford said. "You're getting grease on it."

Mansfield shrugged and put his foot back on the floor. He had drilled a number of wells for Bedford over the last years; he was all too aware of the man's weaknesses—the love of a dollar, the temptation to gamble, the vanity about his personal appearance. But the fact that Mansfield disliked Bedford had never kept them from doing business. And he, Mansfield, had been eager enough when Bedford had shown him the geological tests of this area. He had left the established fields of Pennsylvania and brought his rig out to this God-forsaken corner of Texas without a word of complaint, hoping to make his million along with Bedford. Which, he thought with dry distaste, proved how good a promoter Bedford really was.

He said now, "All right, Mark. What you want to do?"

MARK BEDFORD had a harried look on his ugly face. He was still clenching and unclenching his fists. Abruptly his manner softened.

"Bob, I can't go out there. She's apt to sling a lawyer at me. You go see just what she wants."

Mansfield grinned sourly. "That's kind of a dirty job, Mark. If you hadn't got me tied into this deal, I'd be damned before I'd do it for you."

Nevertheless he got a bucket of water and washed the worst of the grease off his face in the basin on the lazy bench. For he knew that the partnership agreement he had signed with Bedford obligated him legally, along with the promoter.

When he went reluctantly out to the girl again, he saw that she had gotten a gun from some place, evidently out of one of her saddlebags. It was a .38, and she had stuck it in her waistband.

She had dismounted and led her horse to the oak tree that cast a sparse shadow some fifty feet from the drilling rig. Mansfield noted with distaste that a cluster of big flies the size of honeybees buzzed around the horse. She had turned the horse loose and dropped to a seat in the shade.

"All right, ma'am. Speak your piece."

"I've come about salt water," she said. Her young face was very serious, and also beautiful. "I've got a water well and windmill over the draw there, about half a mile. The water's getting salty, all of a sudden. I thought you might be causing it with this oil well you're drilling."

Mansfield took out a tailor-made cigarette, tapped it on his thumb and lit it. This was what he had known would happen. He thought now that it was a pity Edwina White was a nice girl. It would have been fun to spend a Saturday night with her, and besides, Mansfield had a way with women, and he might have been able to settle this trouble amicably enough. But he did not fool himself. Edwina White was not his kind. Mansfield had never yet played with a girl who didn't want to be played with. It wasn't part of his code to take the stars out of the eyes of one of the nice girls. So he said easily,

"Ma'am, it's the custom in the oil country for landowners to make trouble. Is that what you're doing?"

A flush swept up her cheeks. "It is not. But I can't have my stock drinking salt water. Salt water kills cattle, you know."

"I know. Why don't you water them from a creek?"

She smiled wryly and gestured toward the dried grass at her feet. The grass was brown and parched in the hot, hard earth. "We haven't had a drouth like this in ten years. There simply aren't any creeks left. I have no water except from my windmill."

Mansfield regarded her curiously through the smoke from his cigarette. Even in this strange, hot country of Texas, where men tended animals for a living and where such odd articles of clothing as guns and high-heeled boots were common articles of apparel, it was unusual to find a woman in sole charge of a business.

He said, "You own the whole ranch?"

"Since my father died. I have a younger brother, but he's still in high school." Her eyes looked haggard for an instant, and Mansfield thought that she must be under a strain. He snubbed out his cigarette on his grease-covered boot.

"I doubt if I'm letting salt into your water sand. Maybe you imagined it, ma'am."

"No," she said quietly, "I am not imagining it. Who did you speak to in that little shack over there?" She gestured toward the engine house. "Is Mark Bedford in there?"

Mansfield smiled drily. She wasn't going to be put off. She had signed her lease contract with Bedford, and she would not be satisfied with anybody who might be an underling. He shrugged.

"Bedford can't tell you any more than I have."

SHE WAS on her feet instantly at this partial admission, striding toward the engine house. Mansfield got up and followed her, thinking that he had done all he could. It gave him a sense of grim pleasure to know that Mark Bedford would have to handle her now. He was a half dozen steps behind her when she entered the engine house.

He found Mark Bedford on his feet, facing the girl. Bedford had actually paled a little; Mansfield guessed this was because of the gun in the girl's belt.

"Our contract," Edwina White was saying, "calls for you to pay all damages which result from your drilling operations. Mr. Bedford, I run close to a thousand cows on this land, and I water them all from my windmill. Those cows are worth twenty dollars each. If those cows die from drinking salt water, that'll make twenty thousand dollars you'll owe me, not counting the cost of a new well."

Mark Bedford blinked, and his wide, ugly face sagged a little. But he pulled himself together rapidly. He was after all a promoter, Mansfield thought. He would know the advantages of smooth language. Bedford touched his necktie and became fatherly.

"My girl," he said gently. "I think you're mistaken about salt water in your well. We have taken every precaution to avoid such an occurrence."

In spite of himself, Mansfield sucked in his breath. He had not expected a deliberate lie. He took out another cigarette to cover his confusion, sensing that the girl had turned and was staring at him.

"You," she said, pointing at him. "What's the matter? Do you differ with Mark?"

Mansfield tapped his cigarette against his thumbnail and nodded. He had no particular desire to help the girl, but he did not like to see anybody lied to. "We should have cased off the fresh water sand. We didn't, though, and you could be getting seepage from below."

He sensed, rather than saw, Mark Bedford's ugly face grow black with anger. The girl was frowning.

"Put that in plain English, please."

And Mark Bedford said, "Shut up, Bob." Mark Bedford's eyes looked like ebony beads.

Mansfield grinned at Mark. Then he turned deliberately to Edwina White.

"Ma'am, there are layers underground.

Different kinds of layers. Some of rock, some of fresh water, oil, gas, or salt water. Most of the layers are under pressure. When I drilled through the fresh water sand—the same layer you get your stock water from—I should have sealed it off by cementing in a string of pipe—that's casing—then reducing the size of my hole and drilling on past. I didn't because Mark, here, objected to the expense. I didn't case till I hit a salt water sand. So now, that salt water could be working up between the casing and the sides of the hole, getting into your windmill water. Not saying it is. It could be."

Ruined Romance

By LIMERICK LUKE

A cowpoke 'way out in Nevada
Spied a cutie and wished that he hada,
But the way she spent money
Soon soured his honey,
And left him both wisa and sada!

"I see." The girl digested this, her blue eyes bright. Her head swung from Mansfield to Mark Bedford and back again. She was evaluating the two of them, Mansfield thought, deciding whom she could trust. She frowned slightly then and said,

"Mr. Bedford, I don't wish to be unreasonable. If you will remedy this condition within a few days, I won't press for damages. But it must be fixed, or I shall have to see my lawyer."

She nodded to both men, turned and left the engine house.

Mansfield heard Mark Bedford let out a long low whistle. He heard Mark muttering to himself, and it occurred to him that Mark Bedford did not understand directness. Bedford dealt with rich smooth men; that was his business. Bedford could not be expected to understand a girl who owned a thousand head of cattle and managed them, apparently, by herself.

Grinning, Mansfield left the engine house and walked back to the clatter of the derrick. He twisted the telegraph wheel and released the clutch. Instantly the walking beam ceased its seesaw motion; the racket of the rig faded into dead quiet. In the distance he heard the fading hoofbeats of Edwina White's horse.

Mark Bedford came stamping toward him angrily. "What you shutting down for?" His ugly face was a mottled red.

"We'll have to pull everything and start over." Mansfield reached toward the band wheel clutch. "I can't case out the water sand now without a larger hole. This is going to cost us like sin, Mark."

Mark Bedford snapped, "It's costing nothing. Don't be a fool. You know we can't afford an extra casing string."

"We can't afford a herd of cows, either," Mansfield said mildly. "Mark, we've let salt water into the girl's well. It's only fair to fix it for her."

"Fair!" Mark shouted. "Fair, hell! We haven't got the money. If we case out that water sand now, it'll mean we can't finish the well. This is the best chance you've ever had to strike it rich, Mansfield. Don't toss it overboard like an idiot."

BOB MANSFIELD had been a driller for eight of his twenty-nine years. He knew about the oil business. He knew that a man had to make his luck, that there was no such thing as a million dollars falling into anybody's lap. A man had to earn it, one way or another. And some-

times the ways of earning a million dollars were not especially pleasant. Mansfield knew these things, and so he listened once again to Bedford.

"Twenty thousand dollars," Bedford argued rapidly, "is chicken feed, Bob. You know that. If this well comes in as good as it looks, we can buy the whole ranch and the girl, too, out of a few days' production."

Bedford was leaning forward confidentially over the table in the engine house. His black eyes shone with the excitement aroused by his own words. He was at his best now—promoting. He pounded a carefully manicured hand on the table top.

"Why do you think I wanted to drill this well on a shoestring? Look at facts, boy. The less stock we have to sell to get the well drilled, the more for us! Now, maybe I made a mistake—I'm not denying that. Maybe we should have cased off that sand. But we can handle that girl. We've got to handle her."

Bob Mansfield smoked a cigarette and scrubbed absently at the ground-in grease on his rough knuckles. He had a bitter taste in his mouth that the cigarette would not hide.

He said, "How, Mark?"

"Bob," Bedford said, "I've watched you for years, and I know you. Maybe better than you know yourself. You know what you are, Bob?"

Mansfield shook his head, slightly amused, despite himself, at Bedford's intensity. "What am I, Mark?"

"You're a promoter, just like me. Only we promote different things. I promote oil wells. But you promote women, Bob. Don't deny it. I've seen you."

Mansfield went to the door of the engine house and ground out his cigarette on the jamb and tossed it into the dried grass. When he swung back around his face was savage.

"Damn you, Mark! I ought to beat your teeth in for that!"

"But you won't," Bedford said, smiling. "Because you know it's the truth. I'm not asking you to do anything dishonorable, Bob. Just make friends with the girl. Find out what she plans to do. Stall her if you can. Try to keep her from seeing a lawyer. It's a thing you can do."

Mansfield sat down at the table. He put his chin in his hands and stared through the window at the rig, standing idle outside. The drilling cable hung taut in the center of the mass of steel and wood and machinery that made up the derrick. In his mind, Mansfield traced that cable. It entered the hole in the derrick floor and plunged downward some thousand feet into the bowels of the earth where hung the bit, a two-ton sledge that was constructed to eat through rock and shale and sand down to where fabulous wealth lay waiting to be tapped. Mansfield thought of the oil down there, and he thought of the thing he would have to do to get that oil. He felt a sickness in his stomach.

"Why don't you sell some more stock?" he asked Bedford. "It isn't too late for that."

"But it is," Mark Bedford said wearily. "Bob you can't promote a well that's got a lawsuit hanging over it. Besides, this is easier, and it'll make us more money."

Mansfield rose to his feet, then. He took another cigarette out of the pack, looked at it and put it back, because he did not want the taste of it. He spoke grimly.

"Mark, if you had a nickel for every slimy scheme you've concocted, you wouldn't need to promote wells for a living."

Mark Bedford only grinned and touched his necktie with white slender fingers.

"You'll see the girl?"

"I'll see her. That's as much as I can promise, Mark."

WHEN he left the rig that night he went afoot. He had bathed and shaved and scrubbed for a long time at the grease on his knuckles. He wore a white starched shirt open at the collar and gray trousers and a pair of the Texas high-heeled boots that he had bought last week just for the hell of it.

As he strode through the moonlight he found that the boots made walking uncomfortable, and he cursed them, as he had

cursed most things in Texas. He was an Easterner, and a city boy at that. Yet now, as he walked, he became slowly aware of a quality of beauty in the night, and a feeling of strange contentment stole over him.

Moonlight laved the prairie with glowing silver, touching the drab sage-covered earth with a hint of magic. Cattle loomed black around him. Edwina White's windmill stood like an ebony skeleton against the stars, its wheel clanking busily.

Mansfield passed the windmill and continued toward the house, where a lantern showed at the big red barn. The lantern illumined a set of board corrals where, inside, he saw the shadowy figures of more cattle, and Edwina White.

She had two cows in the corral, and two baby calves. Approaching soundlessly, Mansfield noted that the cows were standing dejectedly, with heads down. They were shockingly thin, with sharp hip bones and rough hair. They made scarcely any protest when Edwina White roped them with a skillful flip of her lasso, snubbed them to a post, and injected something with a sharp jab of a hypodermic syringe. Watching unobserved beside the corrals, Mansfield felt his heart begin to pound in his throat.

He caught a brief glimpse of Edwina White's face as she bent over one of the calves, and he was surprised to see a look of pity. The girl was very near to tears as she produced a bucket and patiently taught the baby calf to drink. It was not an easy task, but the girl was good at it. She kept crooning gently to the calf, persistently guiding its head downward into the bucket with her fingers in its mouth. Ten minutes later the calf was drinking eagerly.

Mansfield stood with his back against the corral when Edwina White came out, carrying her lantern. Edwina turned quickly when she saw him. "You!" Her face went white.

"It's me, Edwina," he said gently. "Don't be frightened. What's the matter with the cows?"

"Salt water." She set down the lantern. Mansfield could see now that she still wore the .38 in her waistband. "I've given them glucose. Maybe they'll live." Her voice saddened. "But they'll never have another calf."

Mansfield said, "Oh," and there didn't seem to be much he could add to that.

The lantern at Edwina's feet cast a yellow glow into her face, shadowing her eyes but tinting her blonde hair with radiance. Her face in that strange light looked inexpressibly sweet to Mansfield, inexpressibly young and childish.

He felt a hard lump in his throat, and without thinking he went to her and took her by the shoulders and kissed her.

He was conscious of surprise that she did not pull away. Instead she touched him momentarily on the cheek before stooping to retrieve the lantern. Then she stood watching him gravely. This afternoon she had flushed, but now there was no hint of embarrassment about her.

Mansfield said, "I'm sorry, Edwina. I had no right to do that."

"Then why did you do it, Bob Mansfield?" Her eyes shone now as she lifted the lantern slightly.

He shrugged, not knowing how to answer. He asked, "Why did you let me?"

She smiled. "It's never been done before, I can tell you. Nineteen years old, Bob Mansfield, and I've never been kissed. I was waiting for the right man."

The hard lump in his throat was more painful now. He shook his head. "You're mistaken. I shouldn't have come here."

He turned and stalked into the darkness. Behind him he heard her cry. "No, wait, Bob." But he only quickened his pace, feeling sweat break out on his forehead as he trotted into the sagebrush.

BACK at the rig, Mark Bedford had built a small fire and sat before it, a heavy white-haired figure, smoking a cigar. He betrayed extreme nervousness in the way he cocked his head at the sound of Mansfield's approach, and he rose quickly when Mansfield came into the light.

"Well? What'd you find out?" he demanded.

Mansfield halted and stood there a mo-

ment, looking at Mark Bedford. He was thinking that a man had to draw the line somewhere. It had been a mistake on his part not to have drawn it years ago.

"She's got some mighty sick cows," he said at last. "And she's a fine girl, Mark."

Mark Bedford spat out an evil oath. "To hell with the girl! What's the matter, Bob? She turn you down? Wouldn't she let you—"

Mansfield strode forward and hit Bedford with the back of his hand. The blow swung the man's head around, and he would have fallen if Mansfield hadn't grasped his shirt front. Mansfield yanked Bedford close to him.

"Drop it, Mark." His voice shook. "That girl's too clean for either of us even to speak her name. Drop it right now, or I'll —I'll—" He broke off, the intensity of his emotion leaving him weak and trembling.

Mark Bedford pushed Mansfield's hand from his shirt and stepped backward. Contempt grooved his ugly face. Bedford touched the reddened place on his cheek where Mansfield had struck him, and his lips moved silently.

"So you've gone soft on me?" he said. "Bob, I never expected that of you."

Mansfield shrugged. He had no interest in what Bedford thought. He sat down on a rock before the fire and stared bitterly into the flames. At length he said wearily,

"I'm done, Mark. I'm leaving you, busting the partnership. I'll be no party to killing that girl's cattle."

"No," Mark Bedford said. "You aren't leaving, Bob."

Something in Bedford's tone brought Mansfield's head up with a jerk. He saw the glistening thing clenched in Bedford's fist, and a wave of shock rolled through him.

"Put down that gun, Mark! Don't be a fool!"

Bedford shook his head. His black eyes glittered as he faced Mansfield across the fire. The greed that had always been clearly evident in Bedford stuck out all over the man now, as he clenched the tiny derringer in a white fist.

"A man only gets a chance at a million once, Bob. This is mine. You're not going to spoil it for me."

Mansfield had faced death more than once in the many accidents that happen around oil rigs, but he had never faced this kind before. And he sensed that there was not much difference. The important thing was to keep cool. To try to avoid death, and if you could not avoid it, to meet it with decency and courage. So he spoke mildly, "You can't operate the rig alone, Mark."

"I can hire a roustabout." Mark Bedford grinned and shifted the derringer a little in his hand. It was evident to Mansfield that Bedford was enjoying this.

"Remember our contract, Bob? In the event of the death of one partner, the survivor inherits all oil properties."

Mansfield shrugged. "Did you ever hear of men getting hung for murder, Mark?"

"Sure." Bedford nodded. "But did you ever hear of smart lawyers? And did you ever hear of a millionaire getting hung? Don't be childish, Bob."

Mansfield said, "Mark, there's someone behind you."

Mark Bedford smiled. "Bob, that's the oldest—"

THE GUNSHOT didn't come from behind Mark Bedford, for there actually had been no one there. The shot came from one side, surprising both men. Mansfield plunged wildly to his feet, seeing the derringer spin out of Bedford's hand.

As he leaped across the fire, he was aware that Bedford had dropped to his knees and was scrabbling frantically for the derringer with his left hand. Mansfield dropped down atop him at the same moment that Bedford's hand closed on the little gun. Desperately Mansfield grappled for Bedford's left wrist and got it.

Bedford was on his back on the ground, then, with his feet almost in the fire and the derringer in his left hand. Bob Mansfield lay crosswise of Bedford and on top of him, his right hand gripping Bedford's left wrist. The big promoter writhed and struggled to twist the derringer toward his partner.

Mansfield gave a heave of his lithe body and managed to bend Bedford's left arm downward. He heard a bone snap in Bedford's arm, and at almost the same instant the little gun exploded.

Mark Bedford convulsed, then lay still. Bob Mansfield rose with a kind of horror, knowing, even before he saw the wound in Bedford's chest, that Bedford was dead. Mansfield turned and saw Edwina White walking into the circle of firelight with her .38 in her hand.

"Edwina," he said and went toward her quickly. He took her by the shoulders and turned her around so that she would not see Bedford's body. Blood was still pounding madly in his temples, and his lungs felt on fire from his strenuous exertions. But somehow it seemed important to him to appear calm at the moment.

He said, "Thank you for coming, Edwina."

The girl looked at him with grave eyes. "He would have killed you, wouldn't he?"

Mansfield nodded soberly. "I was about to quit him. We wouldn't have had the money to finish the well, after we'd cased out your fresh water sand."

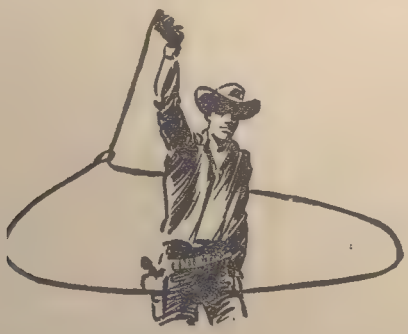
"That's why I came here," she said. "I wanted to offer you a loan, if you needed it. The cattle business has been good these last twenty years. The ranch has been doing well enough, so that I can borrow on it. I would invest in your oil well, Bob Mansfield."

He stared at her in wonderment. He had tabbed her as one of the nice girls, one of the shy lonely ones who dreamed of an ivy cottage and a cradle. And that was true. But Mansfield was utterly confounded at the knowledge that this girl was clever enough to recognize exactly what she wanted when she saw it. And bold enough to find a way to get it. And the thing she wanted was Bob Mansfield.

He said, "Edwina, you are a very curious girl."

"Am I, Bob Mansfield?"

"Put away your six-gun," he said. "I am going to take you to town tonight and marry you. And we wouldn't want the preacher to get the wrong idea."



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COWBOYS CAN'T QUIT

by ELSA BARKER

PART I

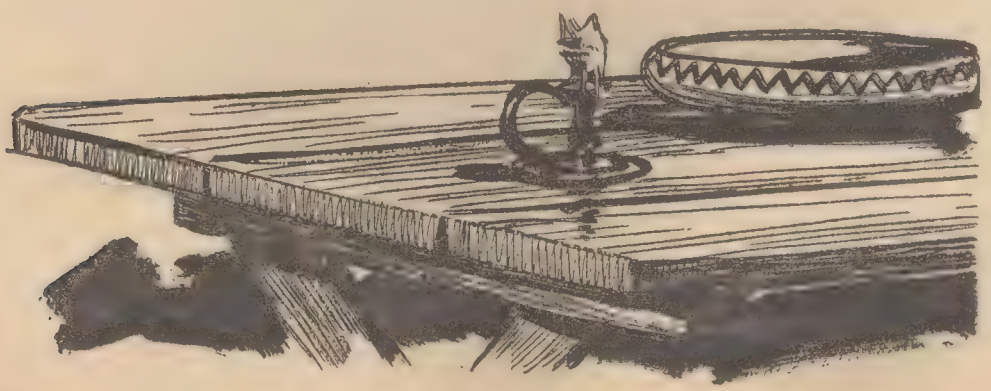
IT WAS the voice that first attracted Lucy Merritt and her father. It came to them around behind the big store where their freight wagons were being loaded. The voice was deep and resonant, strangely musical in its sing-song chant.

The Merritts walked out to the street and saw a crowd gathered around an old medicine wagon. Across the canvas sides in big, bright red letters were painted the words: "Dr. Merlin's Wizard's Brew & Elixir of Youth."

On a small platform beside the wagon stood a round, roly-poly little man in a black business suit and round stew-pot black hat. Curly, luxuriant red hair fell almost to his shoulders. An equally curly and luxuriant red beard covered the lower part of his face. The voice could have come from a barrel-chested opera singer:

". . . . it's the secret that Ponce de León died looking for, ladies and getlemen! The secret of eternal youth! It's my own special mixture of rare old herbs. You can't buy it anywhere else on earth. I learned it from a Tonkaway Indian medicine man. Think of what poor old Ponce de León would have done if he'd been offered the Elixir of Eternal Youth for *only one dollar!*" He swept off the black hat with a wide gesture.

AN ELDERLY LADY who doesn't approve of guns and a pretty girl who acts like she hates you can make life tough



"Look at me! I was bald as an onion—didn't even have a beard—before I learned the secret of this wonderful Wizard's Brew and Elixir of Youth! I'm seventy-five years old—but look at me! I feel like a man of thirty! Step right up, folks—only one dollar! Cures everything! Apply it externally on a cut finger! Drink it as a sure cure for cancer!"

A murmur of laughter went through the crowd, but there was interest too, a half ashamed interest, as though they knew it was a sucker game; but that voice could pretty nearly have sold anybody anything.

A gaunt man in farmer's bib overalls pushed his way to the front holding a silver dollar high over his head.

"Here!" he said, laughing. "I'll take a bottle. I reckon it's worth it—just to hear you talk!"

"Thank you, sir!" the little man beamed. "Here you are—God bless you!"

He handed the farmer a small bottle filled with brownish looking liquid.

That one sale broke the ice. Others pushed forward. Soon the little man was doing business as fast as he could rake in money and hand out bottles.

Lucy Merritt slanted a smile up at her father. "Want some?" she asked. "It doesn't seem exactly fair to come in free."

Todd Merritt grinned back at her. "The show's about over," he said. He jerked his head sideways. "Look comin'."

Tom Smith, the marshal of Abilene, was a tall, grim looking man and there was something purposeful in the hard way his boot heels clicked along the board walk.

The little man saw him out of the corner of a crafty eye. He closed the box containing the medicine bottles quickly.

"That's all, folks. I'm sure sorry—but that's all I've got today."

He reached for the wagon step, but the marshal was already at his side.

"Merlin—you damned old faker!" he said sharply. "I told you once before to keep that wagon off the streets of Abilene. Turn out your pockets an' give that money all back—or I'll run you in."

"Let him keep it!" a voice from the crowd laughed. "Maybe it's a fake—but I want to try it!"

The marshal ran a hard eye over the crowd. One hand reached the black hat off the little man. The other lifted the luxuriant red hair just as easily. He raked the heavy red beard off.

The little man stood exposed, a round, bald, shiny head—a round, rosy face—somehow almost as naked as if he had been publicly undressed.

"You still want him to keep the money?" the marshal asked.

For a moment the crowd was silent. The little man didn't look ashamed—his blue eyes looked angry. They darted over the crowd, rested a moment on Lucy Merritt standing back a little, tall and straight, laughter on her face.

A man in front held up a bottle. "Give me my money!"

Lucy touched her father's arm. "Let's go," she said.

DIKE Evans stared gloomily at the dusty, paper strewn desk in front of him. More papers bulged haphazardly from the half open drawers. Old Ben Gilstrap had not been a neat office man.

Dike wadded up the five pages of closely written script he had just finished and threw them in the wasebasket. He took out a fresh sheet of paper, looked up the address of the chairman of the board of directors of the eastern syndicate that owned the C Bar S, a Miss Eliza Lovelady, Chicago.

Dear Miss Lovelady:

I am sorry to report the death of Ben Gilstrap, manager of the C Bar S. Probably he was murdered. Because he was an honest man and tried to do his duty, although why he felt he owed any loyalty to an outfit that had treated him as you folks have, is beyond me.

I know and Ben knew, that you have kept spies in this country, who have continually reported that the reason for the heavy losses on the C Bar S was because Ben and other hands on the ranch were stealing you blind.

I want to say that they are damn liars—and that in my opinion the reason this ranch is losing money, and always will, is

because of a policy of damn stinginess, the like of which the west has never known before. We've got half enough hands to handle a ranch this size, half enough horses, not one tenth enough water, half enough equipment, and twice as many cattle as the range will support.

Dike Evans

When he had finished, he felt better. He had no idea the stir his terse, angry letter would arouse in the staid circle of the rich owners of the C Bar S—or the changes it would make in the history of the ranch.

Old Ben Gilstrap had raved privately about the way he was treated, and the way the ranch was managed from the east, but always his letters had been reserved and diplomatic.

Dike had not said half what was on his mind, but the letter would do. He stuck it in an envelope before he changed his mind again, and went to stand at the long side window.

Outside, to the unknowing eye, the picture looked good. As untidy as he had been about his paper work, Ben Gilstrap had been hell for spit and polish outside. The corrals and barns were in good shape, freshly painted white. Beyond them stretched thousands of acres of rolling, green grass land—the best cow country in the world.

But Dike was seeing again that the grass was clipped too short. Rains had been fair this summer, and the cattle should have been fatter, only there were too many of them. They had to be concentrated too heavily on the few sections of the range where there was natural water.

The cowboy's thick dark hair was rumpled where he had run harassed fingers through it as he struggled to make some sort of a sensible report from Ben Gilstrap's haphazard bookkeeping. His dark browed brown eyes were well set apart by a nose as straightly clean cut as a capital A, yet with a slight up-curve to its nostrils that gave shapeliness and a look of high spirit to his entire face. It wasn't the handsomest man-face in the world. On a shorter man it might have looked too long and thin—but topping Dike Evans' sinewy slimness it looked a little better than all right. Visible in its wrinkle-cornered eyes and wide mouth were humor—and the look of a man who knows what he knows too well to feel any need to brag about it.

Now the wide mouth was drawn thin, the dark eyes were smoldering with anger. Old Ben Gilstrap was dead—and Ben had been his friend.

It is as natural for a good cowboy to feel loyalty to the brand he rides for as it is for him to breathe, to eat, or to like the feel of sunshine on his body. Dike Evans felt little loyalty to the C Bar S—and he doubted if any of the other cowboys did. Ben Gilstrap had somehow stayed loyal through five carping, quarrelsome years—and because of it he was dead.

THE COWBOY'S smoldering dark eyes caught movement in the distance—two slow moving freight wagons rolling toward the house through the cottonwood flanked lane. Dike watched for a moment, then turned back to the clutter of papers on Ben Gilstrap's desk. He rummaged through them, found the last list of supplies ordered from the big Turner General Mercantile Co. in Peñalosa. He tucked it in his pocket and went outside.

The big freight wagons pulled by the stone store house in the rear of the yard had already started to unload.

The lead wagon's driver was tall and thin, slightly stoop shouldered. His face was sharp featured, his gray eyes bright, his sandy hair and mustache sprinkled with gray. He turned a good humored glance on Dike.

"Howdy, cowboy!" Then his smile quickly sobered. "I was mighty sorry to hear about Ben Gilstrap!"

Dike nodded, not wanting to talk about it.

The driver of the second wagon had climbed up onto the first one and loosened the ropes, getting ready to ease some sacks of corn to the man on the ground. Dike realized with surprise that it was a girl. Even clad in old bib overalls and a faded blue shirt, her figure showed a shapely, rounded slenderneses that was definitely not masculine.

"Wait a minute, miss," Dike said quickly. "I'll get someone else to help. Those sacks are too heavy for you."

The girl turned. She shoved her old Stetson to the back of her head, showing a fringe of curly, dark red hair, dampened with perspiration. Under its tan her face looked drawn, her big gray eyes circled with fatigue.

She smiled at Dike.

"Thanks. I'd appreciate it. They *are* heavy."

She was an amazingly pretty girl, and that smile did something to Dike Evans' hitherto fairly well rock-ribbed heart. He called to a cowboy shoeing a bronc in a nearby corral.

"Hey, Tonk—come give us a hand, will you?"

The cowboy loosed the bronc and swung short legs over the corral. His pace quickened a little when he took in the fact that it was a girl on the wagon. His small black eyes brightened.

Tonk Wallenberg was pock-marked, broken nosed, and part Tonkaway Indian. He was built small, bowlegged and skinny. He was tough as hell, a top notch bronc rider, a little hard on horses, moody, profane, a hard drinker, without many discernible morals—except loyalty to his friends, of which he had few. Dike Evans was one. Ben Gilstrap had been another.

Dike had the supply list in one hand, the keys to the storehouse in the other. He chin-pointed to the wagon.

"You hand the stuff down to Merritt, Tonk. I'll check it, and stack it inside."

Tonk nodded, his eyes still on the girl. Knowing how Tonk appraised all women as possible honkytonk material, Dike Evans should have noticed. But he didn't.

Tonk stepped forward as if to help the girl as she started to climb down out of the wagon. He reached one hand up and steadied her elbow. He grinned. As if pulled by an irresistible magnet the other hand reached out and pinched one shapely hip.

The girl flinched but came on down. As if on a well oiled swivel, she swung her right arm. The open palm smacked sharply against a pock marked cheek. Tonk stepped back, still grinning.

Dike caught his arm. "Cut out the rough stuff, Tonk!" he said sharply. He looked at the girl. "I'm sorry, miss."

The old freighter had come around the end of the wagon just in time to see the slap. Now he took a quick step forward.

"By godfrey, what's goin' on here? I'll—"

"It's nothing, Dad," the girl said quietly. "Just a little clean, cowboy fun!"

SHE GLANCED at Dike, all the friendly warmth of a few minutes ago gone now from her face. Her gray eyes were frosty and a little contemptuous. She turned and walked to her own wagon, got up on the seat and stayed there.

Dike turned back to the tall freighter. "I'm sorry, Mr. Merritt," he said. "Tonk didn't mean any harm."

Tonk grinned slyly and said nothing.

The freighter looked from one cowboy to the other. "He better hadn't," he said grimly. "I'll kill any man that bothers Lucy."

Tonk shrugged, not looking much worried. He winked at Dike, then swung agilely up into the wagon and began lifting sacks down to the man on the ground.

In half an hour they had the two wagons unloaded—and were short four hundred-pound sacks of grain, one sack of flour, twenty-five pounds of sugar, and ten pounds of coffee. Dike checked over the list again, frowning.

It wasn't the first time the wagons had been short. Twice before Ben Gilstrap had complained, and both times Sam Turner had sworn that the wagons had left his store with the list completely filled—and the C Bar S had paid the full bill.

It wasn't a large item for an outfit as big as the C Bar S—but it was one of a hundred items that were causing the ranch to lose money steadily, one of a hundred little leaks that Ben Gilstrap had tried in vain to plug.

Dike Evans didn't know just how much authority he had now. As *segundo* under Gilstrap, he supposed he was technically in

Dick heard her suck in her breath with a shocked sob

charge until a new manager was appointed. His loyalty to the brand he worked for was reluctant, but some of it was still there.

He showed the old freighter the list.

"What happened to your load after you left town?" he asked. "You're short!"

The old freighter's ruddy cheeks turned darker. "By godfrey!" he swore. "It's all there! Just exactly the way Sam Turner's men loaded it!"

Lucy Merritt hadn't spoken since she'd climbed up on the wagon seat. Now she turned her head to listen.

With an effort Dike Evans kept from looking at her.

"It's short," he said curtly. "And it ain't the first time!"

"Well—by godfrey! Are you accusin' me?"

"I'm sure as hell accusin' somebody!"

"Well—by godfrey—that's the first time in fifty-seven years that any man ever called me a thief! You think you're man enough to back it up?"

Dike thought he was, but he sure didn't want to. Todd Merritt took a step toward him, his fists clenched. Dike didn't want to back up—but he didn't want to fight an older man—especially the father of a girl as pretty as Lucy Merritt. He was glad when the girl swung down from the wagon, as agile as a monkey, and caught her father's arm.

"Wait!" she said quietly. "*If* there's a loss—we'll make it good! But we won't haul any more freight for the C Bar S. This is our fault—I guess—because we just naturally thought everyone was as honest as we are. Hereafter we'll check every item that goes in our wagons. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Dike. He thought that while a man couldn't tell for sure what was going on behind Todd Merritt's blustering protestations of honesty, anybody would sure know this girl was all right just by looking at her.

He turned to Merritt. "I'll take care of this loss myself. But I aim to get to the bottom of this sneak thievin'. If any apology is due you—you'll get it."

Tony Wallenberg had drifted around the end of the wagon, casually rolling a smoke. At a warning glance from Dike Evans he stopped out of reach of the girl.

Lucy Merritt gave them both a furious look, then swung up to her seat on the wagon—fast.

After they had driven out of the yard, Dike turned to the shorter cowboy.

"Tonk—I wish you'd leave that girl alone. And if it ain't askin' too much—I wish you wouldn't pinch *any* woman—when I'm around."

Tonk grinned and shrugged.

"You ask a hell of a lot in the name of friendship," he complained. "Ain't you ever learned it's one sure way to shut a woman up? It's a compliment—sort of!"

"Some of them don't think so," said Dike.

DIKE EVANS leaned against the wall and tried to pretend he wasn't watching a tall, red-haired girl in a green dress. The dress was probably a cheap cotton one, but it swirled gaily around her slim ankles as she danced, and it couldn't have looked prettier if it had been the finest silk or satin. Lucy Merritt's head was tilted back a little as she smiled up into the face of Tom Gilroy, the owner of Los Vernales—the big ranch adjoining the C Bar S on the west.

It had been a month since Dike had seen her, and during that month the thought of her had had an unwelcome habit of popping unexpectedly and frequently into his mind. Tonight, in Peñalosa, with still an hour to kill until train time, the sound of music had drawn him, with the unacknowledged hope of seeing her again.

The music stopped and Dike made his way through the crowd to her side. He touched her shoulder. She turned and the smile on her lips faded.

"Could I have the next dance, Miss Merritt?"

"No!"

"Would it do any good if I told you I was sorry for what I said to your pa the other day?"

"No!"

Dike didn't give up easily. Girls usually

liked him. He gave this hard boiled redhead the smile that usually worked.

"The new lady boss of the C Bar S is coming in on the train tonight. She's likely goin' to give some of us cowboys the sack. Your pa couldn't use a tall, handsome, cowboy driver on one of this wagons, could he?"

Lucy Merritt gave him a blank look. Dike felt himself flushing with the embarrassment that comes from trying to be funny and failing.

"Have your friend speak to Dad about it," she said coolly. "I don't have anything to do with the hiring of drivers."

Tom Gilroy laid a friendly hand on his shoulder. "You can have a job with me any time you want it, Dike," he said heartily.

"Thanks," said Dike dryly.

Over Lucy's shoulder, he caught Tonk Wallenberg's eye. The Indian cowboy grinned, held up thumb and forefinger in a pinching gesture. Dike frowned.

The music started, and Lucy danced away again with Tom Gilroy.

Dike swore under his breath. What the hell? There were lots of pretty girls in the world—and this one had made it plain that his lightning hadn't struck her. He had even mentioned another woman, and she had shown that she couldn't have cared less. Lucy Merritt certainly didn't have any way of knowing that Miss Eliza Lovelady, who had bought out the other eastern stockholders in the C Bar S, was a rich, crusty-tempered, disagreeable old maid.

Dike went down to the depot to wait for the train—away from the sound of music, where the thought of a red-haired girl dancing gaily with other men couldn't plague him quite so much.

THE THREE cowboys did not look at all happy. Dike Evans, Tonk Wallenberg, and "Wagon-Bed" Bill McCannigan shifted uneasily on three straight chairs, waiting for the axe to fall.

Dike felt a reluctant stir of admiration for the new owner of the C Bar S, even if he did have a suspicion that he and Tonk and Wagon-Bed were going to be accused of all kinds of skulduggery before they were fired. In spite of her fragile looks and sixty-odd years Miss Eliza Lovelady was tough. All week she had ridden from daylight to dark on the seat of a buckboard beside Wagon-Bed from one far corner of the C Bar S' vast acres to the other. She had taken some notes, she had asked a lot of questions, and she had held her own counsel. At night she had pored over the haphazard account books Ben Gilstrap had left, and now she was ready with the verdict, and a new set of powders.

She was a small woman, delicate featured, and still pretty. She wore black silk dresses, tight fitting around her slender waist, long and full skirted. There were always high button black shoes on her small feet, and high, white lace collars at her throat. She never wore a hat on her curly white hair, but always carried a small black parasol whenever she stepped outside in the sun for even five minutes.

She had brought her nephew, Vencil Briscoe, west with her. He was a pleasant young man, good looking in a well washed, palehaired, droop-eyed sort of way. Dike had an idea that the first words he had ever said when he was a baby were: "Yes, Auntie."

But the cowboys rather liked him. He hadn't tried to high-hat them. He'd climbed on the horse Wagon-Bed had saddled for him the first morning, and when he got promptly thrown, he'd laughed with the rest.

But he hadn't climbed back on. He'd asked for a gentler horse.

Now Miss Lovelady shoved her glasses an inch down on her nose and frowned over the top of them at Wagon-Bed Bill.

"Mr. McCannigan," she said sharply, "before I begin—will you please take your chewing tobacco outside—and leave it?"

In his surprise, Wagon-Bed shifted the cud from right cheek to left. He gulped, nearly swallowing it.

"Huh?" he said.

"You heard me!"

Wagon-Bed gulped again. "I'm—"

Dike had an idea he was ready to say. "I'm quittin'!"

Dike nudged him sharply with his elbow.

"Yes, ma'am," said Wagon-Bed finally, and went outside.

"Wagon-Bed" Bill had gotten his nickname because of a youthful preference for sleeping in a wagon bed—especially in snake country. Now he shared a room in the bunkhouse with Tonk Wallenberg, but the nickname stuck.

He was a small man, sixty-odd years old, slightly cross-eyed so one never knew exactly where he was looking. His long gray beard and yellow gray mustache were topped by a round little berry nose and school-girl pink cheeks. In spite of his constant chewing of plug tobacco, he was "hell for clean." He was the only one of the C Bar S cowboys who took a daily dunking in the clear cold water of Alumbre Creek, winter and summer.

When he came back in the room, Miss Lovelady cleared her throat and picked up some sheets of paper covered with small black script.

"I have here a set of new rules that will henceforth be observed by everyone on the C Bar S," she said. She paused.

Dike Evans squirmed on his chair. During the past week he had come to know the old lady well enough to have a hunch what was coming.

"First—there will be no working on Sunday."

Dike froaned. "Gawdamighty!" he groaned under his breath.

Miss Lovelady looked over her glasses. "I beg your pardon?"

"Nothin'!" said Dike.

"Second—there will be no profanity. Third—no carrying of firearms—of any sort! Fourth—no more card playing—whiskey drinking—or using of tobacco—either in my presence or out of it! For every infraction of these rules the offending cowboy will be docked one dollar from his next pay!"

"By the holy damnits!" breathed Wagon-Bed Bill. "I'm quittin'!"

MISS LOVELADY frowned at him. "That," she said sweetly, "I should think would count as *two* swear words." She made a careful mark in a little black book.

Wagon-Bed gulped again. Dike saw a suspicious looking bulge move in his right cheek.

Miss Lovelady went on: "I am aware that in the past the policy of the owners of the C Bar S has been a niggardly one. That is going to be changed. Ranch accounts, Mr. Evans, show that you have been receiving forty-five dollars a month. From now on your pay will be ninety. Mr. McCannigan and Mr. Wallenberg will be raised from thirty-five to seventy. Ordinary cow herders receiving thirty, will be doubled to sixty."

"By the holy dammits!" breathed Wagon-Bed.

Miss Lovelady frowned and made another mark in her little black book.

Dike grinned at the older cowboy. "A fool and his money...."

"The ranch needs more men, more horses and more equipment. I have ordered material for ten windmills to be set up at points Mr. Evans considers advantageous. I have ordered wire and posts for a hundred miles of fence. I have ordered plows and fruit trees, material for cow sheds and some chicken houses. I will purchase ten good milk cows and five hundred chickens. In the spring we will plant a hundred acres of corn—the same of oats and alfalfa. The ground must be plowed this fall."

"Gawdamighty!" said Dike, and saw Miss Lovelady make a mark in her little black book.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tonk Wallenberg make a little gesture with thumb and forefinger. Dike restrained a grin, thinking that if Miss Lovelady knew what that meant it would rate at least five demerits in her school teacher book.

"My nephew will, of course, be general manager—second in command to me. He will also be in charge of hiring all new personnel. Mr. Evans will be in charge of new building operations—fencing, setting up windmills, etc. Mr. McCannigan's duties will be close to the house. I will need some competent, trustworthy man to drive me about the ranch. He will also take

care of the chickens, oversee the fall plowing, and setting out the fruit trees."

"By the—" began Wagon-Bed, gulped and stopped.

Tonk Wallenberg's face broke into a happy, malicious grin.

"Mr. Wallenberg will purchase the needed new horses—and properly gentle them." Tonk's grin widened even more. "He will also attend to the milk cows."

That flattened Tonk down to size. Dike didn't dare look at either of the other two cowboys.

"I overlooked rule Number Five. Cowboys on the C Bar S will shave every day." She paused, looking thoughtfully at Wagon-Bed. "Except that in respect to his age, Mr. McCannigan will be permitted to keep his whiskers."

WAGON-BED drew a long breath. Then before he had a chance to get docked another two dollars, someone knocked on the front door. Vencil Briscoe answered it.

The new arrivals were Tom Gilroy and his sister Mary, from the neighboring Los Vernales ranch. Dike Evans made the introductions.

Tom Gilroy wasn't much past thirty, but already he was widening into a comfortable middle-aged spread. His eyes were big and brown, his smile wide, and his voice soft. He didn't actually click his heels and kiss the old lady's hand, but he somehow managed to give the same impression.

Miss Lovelady's black eyes brightened, and Dike knew that she was thinking that at last she had met a "perfect western gentleman."

The Gilroys' mother had been a Spanish-American girl from one of the foothill *placitas*. From her both Tom and Mary had their large dark eyes, soft voices, and gentle manners, but his Spanish ancestry was a thing Tom Gilroy chose to forget when he could. Mary, on the other hand, was proud of it, and was said to visit freely with her humbler hill-country cousins.

Miss Lovelady looked at the three C-Bar S cowboys and said curtly: "That will be all tonight."

"Yes, ma'am," said Dike politely.

Over her brother's shoulder Mary Gilroy winked at him. She was a slim, high-strung girl with more vim and vigor than she knew what to do with. She could mind her proper manners as well as her brother, but she broke a rule or two when she chose.

Now she followed the three cowboys out onto the porch.

Wagon-Bed exploded as soon as the door was safely shut.

"By the holy dammits—I'm a notion to quit! What are we supposed to be doin'? Runnin' a—dammit—farm?"

Mary Gilroy suddenly giggled and gave Tonk Wallenberg a little shove.

"Cut it out, Tonk," she said good naturedly. "That's no treat to me."

"Gawdamighty!" said Dike. "And not one single, damn word about who is goin' to take care of three thousand head of cattle—nor when—nor how!"

"Mr. Evans—supervisor of post hole diggin'!" Tonk mocked him.

"We got two dogs," growled Wagon-Bed, patting one of them. "I reckon I'm supposed to curry them, too!"

"Maybe the ol' lady ain't blind though, Tonk," said Dike. "Milkin' ten cows night and mornin' will give your fingers lots of practice!"

Mary Gilroy giggled again. "You boys are vulgar," she said. "I'm going back in the house where the talk is more genteel." She turned to go, then stopped beside Dike Evans. "Dike—you said you'd come over to see me sometime."

"I've been busy," said Dike. He looked down at her. Lamplight streaming out of the window was kind to her thin, dark face, and big eyes. It made her almost as pretty as a certain red-head. "I'll be over Sunday," he said.

"If I can get away from Sunday school in time, I'll come along," Tonk offered.

"You aren't invited," Mary said blandly. "You'll have to stay home and pinch cows."

She went back inside. The three cowboys started for the bunkhouse. Wagon-Bed shook his head.

"I think I'll quit," he said gloomily. "I

cain't stand it! No woman can tell me whether I can keep my whiskers or not."

Dike Evans didn't speak for a minute. The air was cool and mellow against his face. The night was dark and the stars seemed almost close enough for him to reach up and pick off a handful. He had thought he had no feeling of loyalty to the C Bar S, but he was conscious of a deep reluctance to leave now—a feeling that it somehow wouldn't be right.

"She thinks she knows it all," he said slowly. "And she's goin' to have to make every mistake in the book to find out different. But she's got sense in that hard little head of hers. She could learn if we was here to help her. Besides—I'd kinda like to find out why Ben Gilstrap was killed."

"So would I," said Tonk soberly. "Only how we goin' to do anything without guns?"

"A smart man," said Wagon-Bed piously, "can always figger out some way to out-think a woman."

Tonk gave a derisive hoot of laughter.

LIKE AN old rusty bucket used too long and given too big a load, the bottom suddenly dropped out. Hell started popping all over the range. The dozens of little leaks that had harried Ben Gilstrap turned into a deluge.

A number of things had kept the C Bar S from branding the calf crop early this year. First late spring blizzards had kept the short-handed crew working frantically to save as many new born calves as they could. As a result of the unseasonable weather the grass had been late, and cows and calves were both too weak to stand the added strain of a roundup. Many of the crew had quit in disgust. Ben Gilstrap, the manager, had been killed. Dike Evans, short-handed, had pitched in and done the best he could, but by late summer half of the calves were still unbranded.

Vencil Briscoe, on the advice of Tom Gilroy, had hired four more cowboys. Two of them seemed quiet, capable cowhands. The other two, Cuff Stimson and Abe Carnico, were big, rough and tough, the kind that seemed more accustomed to handling guns than ropes. Briscoe was riding daily either to town or to Los Vernales "to interview applicants for employment," as he put it, but after the first four no more riders showed up.

With Tonk Wallenberg and Wagon-Bed Bill tied down close to the house with small-

She was still pretty

time chores, and only three other old time C Bar S regular cowhands, Dike was still short handed for the job he had to do.

Miss Lovelady was tender-hearted and hated the idea of the hot iron, so she had ordered a barrel of some new fangled branding fluid, to be painted on with a brush. Until it arrived the rest of the branding would have to wait.

Freight wagons began rolling in almost hourly, with lumber, paint, nails, wire,

grain—everything in God's world except more men to work—and branding fluid. The ranch took on an air of bustling activity that almost disguised the fact that there wasn't anything of any real value being done.

With the helpless feeling that he needed to be fifty different places at once, Dike was in the saddle from dawn to long past dark. On Vencil Briscoe's orders, material for the new windmills and lumber for new line camps were hauled in to the spots where they were to be used, covered with tarps, and left. The same was done with wire and posts for new fences.

Trouble started when Slim Parker rode a lathered horse into the ranch one night with news that twenty unbranded calves had disappeared from the Ojo Feliz. Apparently they had been hauled off in wagons, but with freight wagon tracks all over the range it had been impossible to track them more than a couple miles.

Slim Parker was an old C Bar S hand with plenty of cow savvy. Dike knew he could depend on him. He called him aside, out of hearing of the new men Vencil Briscoe had hired, and told him to get the roundup wagon ready. They would leave before dawn—without orders from the boss—and maybe by the time the calves were caught, the new branding fluid would have arrived.

Tonk and Wagon-Bed helped get ready. By moonlight they hazed horses into one of the big corrals—loaded bed-rolls, branding irons and grub into the big old chuckwagon.

At four o'clock Dike roused the four new men. They, with himself, and Slim Parker made up the crew. The wagon rolled out of the yard before dawn.

IT WAS nearly noon when they reached Los Charcos canyon, stopped the wagon and made camp. In the spring this canyon had a fair head of water, but in midsummer it dwindled to a series of small pools, fed by usually permanent small springs.

Just east of the Ojo Feliz, was the farthest usable range from the home ranch, where calf thieves could be most expected to strike. As he had expected, some of the calf crop was missing, the mothers wandering about bawling and fretful, their udders swollen and painful.

Here where water was scarce, gathering the herd was not much of a chore. As the old cows trailed in to noon-day water, Dike ran an experienced eye over them and decided some of the older stuff was missing too. That also was as he had expected.

The C Bar S was one of the easiest of brands to change, but Ben Gilstrap had never been able to persuade the owners to adopt another. In the past five years half a dozen small nester-ranchers had settled below the breaks and registered brands strikingly similar to the C Bar S. Brands like G8—OH5—OB8, and the Lazy Ant.

Ben Gilstrap had been particularly suspicious of the extra curlicues on that Lazy Ant brand. Dike Evans was too. Bill Campbell, its owner, was a former foreman of the Los Vernales ranch. He was a burly, tough-talking, gun-toting cowboy, more often seen playing poker in the back of the Red Mule saloon in Peñalosa than paying attention to his small but increasingly prosperous ranch.

After an early and quick dinner, the cowboys started throwing cattle into the corrals near the water holes, where most of them were already gathered in the shade of big old cottonwoods. Slim Parker started the branding fires.

Dike Evans, riding a wide circle to bring in a few stragglers, spied a fast moving cloud of dust sailing toward the camp from the west. He brought his gather in at a run and pulled up beside Slim Parker and the branding fire.

"Trouble comin'," he said, chin-pointing toward the swirl of dust.

Slim turned to look. Now they could see that it was a buckboard, drawn by a fast trotting team of bays. They could also see the top of a jauntily held little black parasol skimming toward them.

"Oh, Gawd!" groaned Slim. "How long you reckon it would take to dig a hole big enough to hide a chuckwagon and six cowboys?"

"Too long," said Dike. "Ol' Wagon-Bed's hittin' a right smart clip."

SLIM SHRUGGED. He carefully selected a couple more hunks of mesquite root, shoved the branding irons in where the coals were hottest.

Dike hesitated, then decided to wait. After all, he had acted in the old lady's best interests. But it was her cows and her ranch. Now that he had been caught, it was up to her to call the tune.

"I don't reckon this ought to get us any more than five de-merits apiece in her cranky-book," he grinned.

Wagon-Bed brought the team of bays to a flourishing stop near the fire. He looked at Dike and shrugged, a suspicious bulge moving fast in his right jaw.

Miss Lovelady didn't get out. She looked at the fire, at the cattle in the corral, then at Dike Evans. Her slim shoulders got a little straighter.

"What does this mean, Dike?"

The cowboy noted that "Dike" instead of the customary Mr. Evans, with a little surprise.

He eased himself sideways in the saddle. "It's time your calves was gettin' branded, ma'am."

"I told you I didn't approve of using a hot iron on those helpless little creatures. I told you we would wait until the branding fluid arrives."

Dike decided it was time to stop being so damned polite.

"There've been twenty unbranded C Bar S calves taken from the Ojo Feliz range, Miss Lovelady. Twelve from here." He nodded toward the bawling, calfless cows that had been turned back on the range. "*Those* cows had fine fat calves a week ago."

The old lady turned to look. Even to an inexperienced eye it was plain that the cows had recently had calves, and now didn't.

When she turned back to Dike a little of the fire had gone out of her snapping black eyes.

"Do you mean to tell me that someone has been *stealing* my calves?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Dike. "That's exactly what I meant."

"Why didn't you tell me about this—instead of doing something you know I distinctly disapprove of?"

Dike shoved his hat to the back of his head, and batted his eyes at her.

"What could you do about it?"

She straightened her shoulders still more. "Don't be impertinent, Dike! This is a matter for the attention of the law! You will ride immediately and inform the sheriff of my loss!"

Dike shook his head. "It won't do any good."

"Why not?"

"Because," said Dike levelly, "Rusty Walton used to work for the C Bar S. A couple of years ago the Syndicate sent out an eastern bookkeeper to spy on us for awhile. He reported that he'd seen Rusty Walton drunk in town one day—'consorting with evil companions. Rusty got fired. I think you swung that axe yourself, Miss Lovelady. And I don't think Rusty Walton likes you much any more."

The old lady took a long breath. She was silent a moment, then she said: "Was he guilty—in your opinion, Dike?"

Dike looked surprised. He shrugged.

"I reckon he was drunk all right. But he was a good cowman—and honest. Most folks in Peñalosa County seemed to think so. They elected him sheriff."

"If he is honest—as you say—then surely he won't let some small personal grudge keep him from doing his duty as an officer."

DIKE SHOOK his head again. "You just don't savvy, ma'am," he said patiently. "Rusty's got hundreds of square miles to sheriff over. And only one regular deputy. Outfits like the C Bar S are in the habit of tendin' to their own small troubles."

"How?"

"By hirin' plenty of good cowboys to look after things. By brandin' the calf crop early. And by wearing guns."

Miss Lovelady didn't speak for a moment, then she said slowly: "Vencil's been

trying to get you more men, Dike. Give him time and you'll have all you need."

"Maybe I could help him," Dike suggested.

She hesitated, then shook her head positively.

"I gave him that responsibility. I want him to handle it alone. This ranch may be his some day. I want him to learn how to run it."

Dike nodded, feeling a half reluctant stir of admiration for this iron-jawed little old lady.

"I see what you mean."

"You may proceed with the branding—of course," she went on. "But five men should be able to handle it. You will go to the sheriff, Dike. We will try the law—first!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Dike.

He thought then that he saw a hint of a smile flicker over her grim face.

"You've gained a little weight since I last saw you—haven't you, Dike?"

The cowboy felt himself flushing. He hesitated, but her eyes were compelling. She held out her hand. Feeling something like a little boy caught throwing spit balls by the teacher, he reached inside his shirt to the .45 strapped under his arm, slipped it out of the holster and handed it over. She dropped it gingerly on the floor of the buckboard between her feet. Then she said without turning her head:

"And you, Mr. McCannigan, will please get rid of that disgusting cud of tobacco—immediately!"

Wagon-Bed gulped, started to swear, checked himself, then spat over the wheel.

"Giddap!" he said meekly to the horses, and slapped the reins over their backs.

BACK AT the ranch Dike changed his saddle to a fresh horse and started for town—not too hopefully. Rusty Walton would come out and look things over, but there wasn't much chance that he could discover any better where C Bar S cows and calves were going than Dike Evans and Slim Parker could.

And as Dike had told the old lady, Walton wasn't going to be concerned with saving the C Bar S a little money. He had given the Syndicate five years of good, honest work, then for one mild spree in town, had been kicked off the ranch. He was a good sheriff—but he was human, too.

Five miles from the branding camp, Dike dipped down into Alumbre Canyon and cut into the ranch road to town. Here for about two miles the road wandered along beside the creek, steep canyon walls of soft red sandstone rising abruptly on either side.

At a little bend in the road, where the cliff brushed the road so close that a man in a buckboard or wagon could have reached out and touched it, Dike pulled his horse up sharply.

Scratched with something sharp in the sandstone were the words "OHO SACO." Dike studied it for a moment, thinking that the scratching looked very fresh, and wondering if it had just been some casual marking on a canyon wall, or if it had been put there for a purpose, maybe a message for someone.

Dike rode on again, still wondering.

Around another bend in the road he came upon two empty freight wagons stopped in the road. The way his heart jumped up in his throat told him who it was, even before he spied the dark red hair.

Today she had on a dress again, instead of the old overalls. Not the green one, but this time a blue cotton, long and full skirted, with bands of red and yellow and black rick-rack giving it a gay, almost partyish look.

Todd Merritt had apparently just finished patching a busted tug. He looked up and gave Dike a friendly smile as if they hadn't nearly come to blows the last time they talked.

Dke reined up beside him. "Need any help, Mr. Merritt?"

The older man hopped up onto the wagon seat. "Thanks, no. Got 'er fixed, I think."

His team moved on. Dike dropped back to ride alongside the girl's wagon.

"Looks like you're haulin' again for the C Bar S?"

She gave him a half angry glance, sparked with malice.

"I went to see *Mr. Briscoe* about it," she said. "He was glad to give us the work."

Something about the complacent way she said it gave Dike Evans a sharp stab that might have been jealousy. He didn't let it show in his face.

"Where did you take these loads? I didn't see any fresh tracks goin' up to the ranch this mornin'."

"We took them to the Ojo Seco. Windmill parts and lumber."

Dike blinked. Ojo Seco—pronounced OHO SACO—might be spelled that way by someone who didn't know Spanish.

The Ojo Seco was about the choicest grass land on the C Bar S, but the spring always went dry by mid-summer so that they were never able to use it to the best advantage. They planned to dig a well at the old spring, put up a windmill and a new line camp. Dike had been trying to keep an eye on things, sometimes to camp a man at spots where major freight loads were dumped. But he hadn't known they were starting on the Ojo Seco.

Dike suddenly reined his horse over closer to the wagon. He swung a leg over the saddle, gave a little jump and landed on the wagon seat beside her.

"Mind if I ride with you a ways?"

Lucy Merritt had given a startled little jump, pulled on the reins as if to stop the team, then let them go on again.

"You might have waited until you were invited!"

Dike grinned. "That might have been quite a while."

"You're too big for me to try to throw off the wagon."

Dike sobered. "I'll get off if you say the word."

She threw him a half puzzled, half angry look.

"You bother me," she said. "If you're trying out your charm on me because you think my father—"

"My intentions are strictly honorable," Dike interrupted her.

She flushed a little. "Then—you better get back on your horse. You're wasting your time."

"Why? I've already apologized for the way I talked to your pop the other day. You might even like me—if you'd give me a chance."

She shrugged. "I might," she agreed. "But I don't intend to."

"Why not?"

THIS TIME she did pull up the team. She turned to face him, her eyes angry.

"All right—if you want it in plain English. I'm poor. We've always been poor—although it isn't Dad's fault. He's worked hard. But I want something better. I've always figured that a girl ought to be able to fall in love with a man with property—just as easy as one without."

"Someone like Vencil Briscoe—or Tom Gilroy?"

She shrugged. "Why not? They're both good looking, nice mannered, kind. . . ."

"And rich."

"And rich!"

"I see what you mean," Dike said quietly.

He didn't look at her again. He didn't want her to see how deeply she had finally succeeded in hurting him. He hadn't blamed her for being mad when he'd quarrelled with her father. He had even liked her all the better for refusing to dance with him—but this was different. This was shaking him all over with a fury that was part anger, part wounded pride—and wholly jealousy. He had never laid rough hands on a woman in his life, but now he wanted to do it now. He wanted to take her across his knee and spank her until she cried. He wanted to put his arms around her and hold her tight—to kiss her until he aroused some response in her cold and calculating little heart.

He swung down over the wagon wheel.

If he had looked at her then he would have seen the torment of indecision in her eyes—something like sharp regret—and it might have brought him back. But he didn't turn. He checked his horse, stepped into the saddle. He kept the pony at an even lope the remaining few miles to town.

The sheriff's office was locked. Folks in

the street told him that Sheriff Walton had gone to Kansas City for an operation, and his deputy was in a far corner of the county investigating a knifing at a *Mejicano* Saturday night dance.

IN SAM Turner's General Merchandise Store Dike bought a box of crackers and a tin of sardines, then asked the clerk if they had any small sixshooters.

"Lemme ask Sam," said the clerk and went back to the office.

Turner himself came out. "I heard you wasn't carryin' go-bangs any more on the C Bar S," he said, shifting his cigar.

Dike grinned. "A little one might be handy to shoot rabbits with!"

"And to keep out of the boss's sight?" Turner chuckled. "I don't stock anything but forty-fours and forty-fives." He paused, frowning thoughtfully. "You in an awful big hurry, Dike?"

"Not special," the cowboy shrugged. "Just hate to keep a bartender waitin'. Why?"

"I believe I know where I can get you a thirty-two—used but in good shape. Go ahead and wet your whistle—and come back."

"Thanks," said Dike. "I will."

Up the street he paused in front of the Red Mule Saloon. He had been of half a mind to get rousing drunk. But now the idea sort of soured on him. Deadening his hurt a little while with liquor wouldn't help much. He wanted to cut the ache for Lucy Merritt out of his heart—quick and for good.

He thought of Mary Gilroy, and knew suddenly that he was going to keep that date he had made with her, half in fun, for Sunday. He was also going to do his damnedest to fall in love with Mary. That ought to be a quick and pleasant way to get over his woman trouble.

As he stood there, the saloon door opened and Tom Gilroy and Vencil Briscoe came out. Gilroy spoke casually:

"Hello, Dike." And to Briscoe: "See you tomorrow, Vence."

Dike looked at the slender, fair haired man beside him. Briscoe's eyes were bright, his cheeks flushed, and his step unsteady.

"You'd better soak your head in a tub of cold water before Auntie sees you," he said dryly.

Briscoe grinned. "That's the truth!" He put a hand familiarly on Dike's shoulder, and the cowboy found himself resenting it enough to move away. "I hope you keep this under your hat, Dike."

Dike shrugged. "Sure."

"As a matter of fact, I don't approve of drinking myself—but you know how it is—sometimes you've got to take one with the fellows—or they'll think you're a sissy."

"Yeah," said Dike. "How 'bout them new hands you were goin' to hire for the C Bar S?"

Briscoe clapped him on the shoulder again. "It's all taken care of," he assured the cowboy. "Gilroy has a bunch of good men lined up for us. They'll come next week—or the next."

"I see," said Dike and went on into the saloon, but all he had to drink was one beer.

Leaving town half an hour later, the secondhand .32 Sam Turner had got for him was in the armpit holster under his shirt. He had a shamed feeling about carrying a hidden gun, but he knew that when word got around that C Bar S cowboys rode unarmed, the scavengers would really begin to move in.

Dike had had half a mind to jump Sam Turner out again about freight shortages, but he had decided that was up to Briscoe now.

On his way out he passed a small frame house where two freight wagon teams were being unhitched. He didn't turn his head.

LUCY Merritt was putting supper on the table when her father came in. He had been down town all afternoon. Probably playing poker again, Lucy thought. She didn't particularly object. Even a poor man had to have some amusement, and Todd Merritt usually did a little better than break even.

But tonight she saw that he was worried. He ate hurriedly, almost without speaking, then got up, went to the cup-

board where he kept his sixshooter and strapped it around his hips.

The girl's eyes widened.

"Dad—what's the matter?"

He hesitated, then came around the table and put a hand on her shoulder.

"I've got to go out again tonight, honey. Don't worry. I'll be as careful as I can."

Lucy came up out of her chair in a hurry. "But—but, Dad! What's the matter? You don't usually carry a gun!"

"Look, Lucy—I hear a lot of gossip around town. Usually I keep it under my hat if it ain't any of my business. But tonight I was propositioned—and I don't like it. Not a damn bit. So now I'm goin' out to Ojo Seco to see if I can sorta clean up my reputation with a man named Dike Evans. And after this we don't haul no more freight for the C Bar S!"

Lucy gasped. She put a hand on her father's arm and shook him.

"You're talking riddles! Tell me what you mean!"

"No. If I don't come back—I don't want you to know nothin'."

"Then I'm going with you."

He sat her firmly back down in her chair. He bent and kissed her cheek.

"You're goin' to stay right here," he ordered. "And if you love your ol' daddy—you'll start packin' up our things. After tonight we're goin' to move on to new stompin' grounds."

Lucy knew when it was time to stop arguing. She stayed where she was until she heard him ride away, then got up and hurriedly changed from the blue calico dress to the old overalls.

They only had one saddle and one saddle horse, so she climbed aboard one of the fat backed work mares, dug a hand tight in the mane, and started for the Ojo Seco at a lumbering gait, maddening for its slowness. . . .

Dike Evans reached the Ojo Seco just at dusk. He unsaddled, led his horse a quarter of a mile away and hobbled him. Then he came back, ate a supper of crackers and sardines, without any water to wash them down. With the pile of lumber as a back rest of sorts, his saddle-blanket wadded for a pillow he sat down to wait the night out.

Maybe he was taking needless precautions. He knew that his nerves were jumpy these days, knowing how vulnerable C Bar S property was in a dozen different spots. He hadn't been able to get it out of his mind that those scratched words OHO SACO meant something more than casual scrawling on a canyon wall. It was something that he could have ridden by fifty times and never even noticed—something that only once in a hundred times would have held any meaning for him. Yet it could be a message—a message to somebody that a load of freight had gone up to Ojo Seco—and was to be unguarded tonight.

The minutes of his first hour of waiting ticked by endlessly. He wished he could smoke. Contrary to Miss Lovelady's orders, he carried the makin's with him, but he didn't know how far the glow of a burning cigarette could be seen on a black night.

He shifted a little on the hard board seat, cradled his head sideways against the saddle-blanket and dozed for awhile.

A sound that was somehow different from the usual night noises jerked him awake. He lay without moving, straining his ears to identify it.

Then he got it: the low rhythmic thumping of a galloping horse—gradually coming closer. He identified the direction and shifted his own position to lie stretched out behind a bank of new lumber.

The horse came on. . . . then suddenly stopped. Dike lay motionless, trying to figure out what it meant. A man on a horse couldn't carry away enough stuff to amount to anything—and there were no cattle on this part of the C Bar S range now.

HE LOOKED at the stars and counted time again . . . long minutes that seemed to stretch out endlessly. Then just when he was about to decide that it could only be some innocent passing rider, he heard another noise—much closer: the unmistakable scuff of a man's boot

The noise of the wagons was close

on a rock—then the soft thud of boots in the grassy turf, walking fast, almost running.

Dike flattened still more. There was no moon, but there was starlight, and a cowboy's eyes are used to darkness.

The shape moving toward him looked tall and thin, a little stoop shouldered. Dike suddenly understood that this man was expecting someone else, and that he, like Dike had left his horse some distance away.

The figure moved around behind the pile of lumber, squatted in its shadow, so close that Dike was afraid the other man could hear him breathe. The cowboy lay still.

The silence didn't last long. The new sound was the rumbling of freight wagons, and Dike could tell that their drivers were urging their teams along at a fast trot.

The gun under his arm was a comforting thing now. Cautiously he shifted so that his fingers were on the butt, the noise of the wagons close enough now to cover any slight noise he made.

The lead wagon pulled up not far from the lumber pile, and the next instant a dry twangy voice spoke quietly:

"All right, you boys! Turn around and git back right where you come from. I got you covered—and I won't mind shootin'."

The second wagon had pulled up close to the first. Both men on the drivers' seats sat still for a moment, then one of them asked: "Is that you, Todd?"

"Yes," said Todd Merritt. "I ain't in the habit of nosin' into somethin' that ain't my business—but this time you boys got to leave this load alone. Now git!"

"All right," the man on the first wagon said, sounding reluctant. "If that's the way you feel about it. But didn't the boss talk to you? He'll make it worth your while."

Later Dike Evans knew he should have yelled a warning, but until after it was too late he didn't think of it. He didn't think Todd Merritt would be fooled enough by the other's mild tone to stand up, his tall, lank figure sharply silhouetted against the starlit sky.

The next instant there was a shot. Todd Merritt gave a sharp, startled cry that broke off into a gurgle as he pitched forward on his face.

Dike's armpit gun came out like a flash. If Merritt had been outlined like a sitting duck, so were the two drivers of the wagons.

He pulled the trigger. The hammer made a metallic click, and that was all. He triggered again—and the same thing happened.

One of the drivers said urgently: "What was that noise, Bill?" That was a different

voice speaking—a deeply resonant, musical, unforgettable voice.

"Don't know. Maybe Merritt ain't dead." There was another shot into the body of the man on the ground.

Dike had realized suddenly what was the matter—that Sam Turner, purposely or otherwise, had sold him a gun that wouldn't shoot.

DIKE eased off the pile of lumber close to Todd Merritt's body. He judged from the way their heads were bobbing back and forth, their shoulders moving, as if straining to see through the darkness, that the two men had guessed his presence now, but still hadn't been able to spot him among the dark shapes of the lumber pile and windmill parts.

He reached for the body of Todd Merritt, fumbling around in the dark, until his fingers closed on the freighter's big .45.

A shot so close that it cut the shirt off his shoulder and scorched the skin underneath, winged past him. Another sputted into the ground under his nose. He jumped back behind the pile of lumber and opened a rapid fire.

"My God, Bill! We better get out of here!" The man with the deep voice called urgently, "There's somebody else coming."

Dike shot again. He heard a yelp of pain that told him he had scored, but when he pulled the trigger again, it clicked on an empty chamber.

"Throw your guns down—an' get down out of them wagons!" he called sharply. "I've got you covered!"

They didn't throw down their guns—and they didn't get out of the wagons. Instead they put the whips to their teams. The horses, already excited and frightened by the shooting, jumped into a run.

Swearing to himself, and at himself, for not having tried out the .32 Turner had sold him, Dike Evans had to stand and watch them go.

The next instant there was a cry behind him that turned his knees to jelly. It was a girl's voice, high and frightened, and she was coming toward him at a lumbering gallop.

"Dad! Where are you?"

She yanked her horse to a stop close to the lumber, and looked wildly around, then after the two freight wagons cutting a wide circle back toward the road toward town.

Dike stepped out of the shadows to meet her. She gave a sharp little cry of relief.

"Oh, Dad! I heard shooting. Are you . . ."

As he came closer she suddenly recognized the cowboy.

"Dike Evans! What—what are you doing here?"

Under different circumstances Dike might have reminded her curtly that he had a perfect right to be here—which she didn't.

She had calmed herself down some, and when she spoke Dike could sense that she was trying to puzzle this out, in the meantime trying not to say the wrong thing.

"I—I was looking for my father. He—he said he might come out here."

"He did," said Dike. "Lucy—can I borrow your horse?"

IT WAS in his mind that he could take her horse and perhaps catch up with the freight wagons, but as soon as he said it, he knew that wouldn't do. He had two guns, but one was empty, one no good. It was also doubtful whether the panting, fat mare Lucy was on could catch them. And he couldn't leave a frightened girl alone here with her dead father. Until daylight she would not be able to find the horses he and Todd Merritt had hobbled and turned loose some distance from the dry spring.

"Dad isn't in one of those wagons?"

"No."

"He—he's all right? There was shooting—and I was scared for a minute!"

Dike swallowed. "I'm afraid he's not all right."

"You mean he's hurt? Where is he?" With a lithe movement she slipped off the old mare, and took a step toward the cowboy.

Dike wanted to put his arms around her

—to make easy something that could never be easy.

"Lucy—I'm sorry," Dike said, finding it hard to put into words. "Your dad is gone—he's dead."

She stood still for a moment. Dike heard her suck in her breath with a shocked sob. Then she backed away.

"You killed him! You arrogant C Bar S cowboys think you can do anything and get away with it! You think there's no law to protect folks like us!"

"No!"

"Yes, you did! Dad said he was going to meet you here! He warned me that there was something ugly going on. He said we wouldn't haul for the C Bar S any more. We were going away—after tonight. But tonight he came out here to protect C Bar S property—and because he was honest—you killed him!"

Dike heard the note of rising hysteria in her voice.

"Shut up!" he said curtly. "You're a little fool! You know damn well you don't think that—or you wouldn't be accusin' me of it so brash—way out here—without no protection!"

His very harshness seemed to calm her down a little.

"I'm no fool!" she said sharply. "And I'm *not* without protection."

Even in the dark, Dike could see the swift movement of her hand to her waist, the outline of the sixshooter she swung up. She held it out at arm's length, gingerly, as if half afraid of it—but pointing at him.

(To be continued in the next issue)

WORSHIP in the WEST

OLD-TIMERS tell an interesting story about the little, old, frame edifice, now deserted, that stands today on a small hill overlooking what used to be the hell-roaring town of Chinese Camp, Calif. In the early 1870s that church stood next door to a saloon and gambling den. Its pastor complained the noise made by revelers disturbed his Sunday

services. "Okay," said the saloon-keeper, "if you want to be nearer Heaven, we'll put you there."

One Saturday night a large group of miners, fortified by red-eye, lifted up that church bodily, carried it out of town, and set it down on the hilltop!

In Santa Rosa, Calif., stands the First Baptist Church, which was built in 1872 entirely of lumber milled from one giant redwood tree, whose stump may be seen today about 25 miles away.

Also in California is the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel at Asti, shaped like a huge wine barrel, located in a pioneer wine-growing district. A Baptist church that used to be a railroad chapel car is now permanently placed at Green Lake, Wis. An old frame church in Slater, Mo., has never had music in its services, the doors and windows having been purposely built so narrow that no organ or piano could be brought inside.

Gospel Tabernacle, 40 by 70 feet, at West Yellowstone, Mont., was built by Pastor A. B. Stubbs, a backwoodsman from Wisconsin, with his own hands, felling the timber himself, sawing it into lumber, and nailing it into position. The job took him 8½ years.

At Central City, S. D., the Chicago & North Western Railway leased its passenger-freight depot a few years ago to the local Methodist Church for religious services for 99 years at one dollar a year.

St. Anthony's Chapel, standing in a grove at Festina, Iowa, near the ruins of an old Army post, Fort Atkinson, is one of the world's smallest churches. Measuring 12 by 20 feet, it contains only four pews, seating eight persons. An even tinier Iowa edifice is the Little Church of Grundy Center, 4 by 6 feet, built by L. D. Coffin, in which services are held every Sunday.

Churches for children only include the Little Church of Dinuba, Calif., a frame edifice which stands on a plot 34 by 23 feet beside the parent First Methodist Church; the undenominational Village Children's Church at Whittier, Calif., also frame, 30 by 15 feet; and the undenominational House of God, a handsome stone edifice at Mooseheart near Aurora, Ill. Mooseheart is a complete town in itself, maintained for orphaned children of deceased members of the Moose Lodge.

——***Freeman H. Hubbard***

IT TOOK a woman from the dance halls

of St. Louis to show the wagon train

what selflessness and courage meant

"It's just that I'm no good for you, Jill"

PIONEER

DUSK in the valley of the Platte River deepened from lavender to purple. The long wagon train, shrouded in billowing dust, creaked and rumbled to a halt in the gathering darkness. Up ahead big Amos Stroud, the trail boss, had picked out his campsite on the flats beside the stream. The forming of a ring began, teamsters shouting and cracking whips, horses snorting and bucking into the traces, axles groaning and equipment jangling, as the heavy wagons wheeled into position for the night.

Jill Marden jumped down to help her father unharness, once their Conestoga had settled into its place in the ragged circle. It was an old story now, everybody knew his job and did it. They had come a long way from St. Louis—beyond that, for the Mardens, whose home had been in Connecticut. Now they were between Fort Kearney and Laramie on the Great Salt Lake Trail. So far there had been no Indians, no devastating storms or serious trouble, but today there were rumors of sickness in the train. The Klenk family was stricken, people said, and nobody could diagnose the illness.

Leading their horses to water, Jill Marden saw that painted woman from St. Louis, Nora Bell, leaning idly against a tall wheel, smoking a cigarette and watching the dust-hazed industry with a serene smile. Even after a long hard day on the trail, Nora Bell somehow looked glowing-fresh, cool and immaculate. Jill Marden's brown eyes flashed between narrowed lids, and her dry, chapped lips tightened over white teeth.

What's that woman doing with a wagon train? Jill thought again, bitter and resentful. *She doesn't belong out here, the dance-hall hussy! She's no pioneer. She should have stayed in her sinkhole of sin, back there on the Mississippi.*

Nora Bell raised an indolent hand to the girl. "Can I help you with the horses, dearie? You look awful tired."

"No, thanks, I'm all right," Jill Marden said ungraciously. "You might get hurt—or dirty."

Nora Bell laughed, a clear rippling sound in the shadowy din and confusion. "Heavens, I couldn't be any dirtier than I am now. And I don't hurt very easy, Jill."

"Smoke your cigarette," Jill said with attempted hauteur, tugging on the reins, tripping over a rock as she plunged on toward the river, and barely saving herself from falling.

Nora Bell laughed softly. "Don't *you* get hurt, honey."

Jill Marden strode on, blind and hot with fury, hauling angrily at the reins. Why was it that Jezebel could make her feel so young and silly, awkward and stupid?

I hate her! Jill thought fiercely. *I hate her worse than anything else in the world.*

The Platte, flowing calmly between low willow-screened banks, was lined with drinking horses and cattle, watched over by bearded, trail-gaunt men in buckskin or homespun, with here and there a blue Union tunic in evidence. The sun was gone behind the Rockies in the west, the last faint streaks of sunset fire fading on the skyline, and the river was a dull flat silver sheen in the twilight. In the distance wolves howled mournfully, and coyotes lifted their lonely weird cry.

Tom Carberry, a blond young Massachusetts man, had just finished watering his team when Jill Marden reached the shore. "I'd like to dive in there myself," he said in his quiet way. "How are you standing it, Jill?"

WOMAN

By Roe Richmond

"Fine, Tom," she replied. "Is it true about the Klenks?"

"Afraid so, Jill. They're pretty sick. Nobody knows what it is. Or if they do, they aren't telling."

"You think it might be—contagious?"

Tom Carberry shrugged his strong shoulders. "I don't know. And there's no sense in worrying about it. Too bad for the Klenks, that's all."

"Can't Doc Hulman help them at all?"

"I guess not," Tom Carberry said. "Well, Jill, I'll see you this evening—I hope."

"If you aren't in the male audience around Nora Bell," she said, laughing shortly.

"I won't be. Rodrill's taking over there, it looks like."

Tom Carberry saluted and headed back into the oval, where camp-fires were already blurring the gloom with orange light. Letting her horses muzzle into the stream, Jill Marden looked after him thoughtfully. A nice boy, Tom Carberry, courteous and considerate, mild and pleasant, yet strong and self-reliant, a tall trim figure with a fine blond head, clean cut features, and steady grey eyes. A sober decent young gentleman. But Rodrill, she thought. Rodrill was a man to make all others seem slight, pallid, lifeless and insignificant.

Except for Rodrill, who had been a Confederate cavalryman, all the people in the wagon train were Union, from the North and East. Some said he had been with John Mosby's guerrillas. The war was over, of course, but feeling still ran high. Rodrill himself never showed any, and not even the toughest Northerners cared to call Rod. He was a special guard, a kind of assistant to the Indian scout, Baldock, hired for his skill with guns in all types of warfare. Just thinking of Rodrill sent strange shivers along Jill Marden's spine. And now that cheap saloon singer, Nora Bell, had Rod under her bewitching spell.

Suddenly Rodrill was there beside her, his soft drawling voice in her ear: "Hullo there, little girl."

Jill Marden turned, her breath catching in her throat, the blood leaping in her veins, thankful that darkness hid the telltale flush of her cheeks. "Hullo there, big man," she answered impudently.

Rodrill was a big man, tall and rangy with wide shoulders and long arms and legs, who moved with effortless ease and grace. His hair waved darkly under his pushed-back hat, his eyes were black, piercing and intense. A smiling man with sadness in his eyes, gay and bitter at once, slightly scornful yet strangely gentle. A fighting man, his gun belt low on his lean thighs, heavy revolving pistols holstered on either leg. A gallant and daring man, Rodrill, graceful in the saddle or afoot, speed and power blended beautifully in his long lithe frame.

"Another day, Jill," he said. "They're running mostly the same."

"You're disappointed?" she jibed. "No Indians to kill."

Rodrill smiled gravely, turning his dark head from side to side. "I don't mind having it peaceful, little girl, None whatever. I can stand a lot of peace and quiet."

"You're changing. They say love does that to a man."

"Love?" Rodrill laughed quietly. "Has that come my way at last? Tell me about it, Jill."

"There's someone far more experienced to tell you, Rod," the girl said. "A woman wise with the wisdom of the ages!"

Rodrill frowned reproachfullly. "Even the cutest little kittens have long sharp claws, don't they, Jill?"

They were close together in the dimness, and Jill Marden felt herself drawn irresistibly to this man, her slender body fairly aching to be held in those great long arms, crushed to the sinewy male strength of him.

"I—I'll be getting back to supper," she murmured.

"Just a minute, Jill."

Rodrill must have sensed the hunger in her, for his arms closed gently around her. The girl's free arm encircled him, her head tipping back, her lips, full and quivering, lifted to his. He bent and kissed her, quick

and clean and hard, then let her go in spite of the insistence of her ripe mouth.

"No, little girl," Rodrill said, so low it was scarcely audible. "No, Jill, no."

"But why, Rod? Is it that Nora Bell?"

He smiled with a somber shake of his head. "Not her, not anybody. It's just that I'm no good for you, Jill."

"Is that for you to say—alone?"

"Yes, I reckon so. I know myself pretty well, Jill."

"I'm not a child!" she cried scornfully.

"I know you're not. At first, I thought you were. But this would only hurt you." The dark eyes and weathered face were brooding, almost morbid.

"Perhaps I want to be hurt, Rod."

"But I don't want you to be. I won't let you be, Jill." He turned abruptly to the river. "Don't let them drink too much."

HURT and angered, Jill Marden pulled her team away from the water, and was ready to start for camp without a word, when the huge broad bulk of big Amos Stroud, the wagon boss, loomed beside them. Always afraid of Stroud, she shrank away a little, but lingered as he ignored her presence and spoke directly to Rodrill.

"The Klenks'll never travel tomorrow, Roddy."

"We can carry them along some way, Amos," said Rodrill.

"No, they're too sick," Amos Stroud insisted gruffly. In the vague light, his face looked scared and evil, his iron jaws set and bulging. A burly giant of a man, Stroud towered even above Rodrill's rangy height with a ruthless domineering air of masterful might and power. "They're dyin', Roddy," he went on. "Have to leave 'em. Don't want no epidemic out here."

"An epidemic would have broken out by now."

"Can't take no chance of it," Stroud insisted. "Can't risk all them lives for one family. The Klenks are done for, just a matter of time. Nothin' to do but leave 'em."

"We can't do that, Amos," said Rodrill with calm emphasis.

"We're doin' it," growled Amos Stroud. "I'm bossin' this outfit, boy!"

"All right, Amos," drawled Rodrill. "You'll be losing Baldock and me—and a lot of others."

The giant glared at him. "Mutiny, huh?"

"Humanity, I'd call it," Rodrill said mildly.

"We'll see, mister. We'll see about this." Stroud spat contemptuously toward Rodrill's boots, and wheeled away into the darkness.

"There's going to be trouble, Rod," warned Jill Marden.

"Don't you worry, little girl. Baldy and I can take care of it."

"What's the matter with Doc Hulman?"

"Afraid, for one thing. Stupid, for another. He won't try to help the Klenks. And nobody else—womenfolks, I mean—will go near that wagon."

"Mother and I will," Jill declared. "Mom's a good nurse."

"You haven't seen them," Rodrill reminded gently.

"Is it *that* bad?" she asked in horror and despair.

"It's pretty bad, Jill," he admitted. "But we aren't leaving them to die alone here."

"Somebody'll have to care for them, Rod."

"Yes, we'll find somebody. But not you or your mother."

"Watch out for Amos Stroud," she warned.

"He doesn't worry me," Rodrill said. "But the rest of it does—some."

When Jill's mother heard about the Klenks, she had to be forcibly restrained from rushing to the stricken wagon. Fat Mrs. Pollen returned from a brief visit to the sick family in time to help dissuade Mrs. Marden.

"Oo-ooh, but it's horrible!" moaned the large woman. "They're all bloated and broken out, burnin' and crazy with fever, smellin' somethin' terrible. You can't help 'em, Mrs. Marden. Nobody can help them poor souls. Only God in His mercy can keep it from spreadin' and killin' us all!"

"Somebody could bathe and clean them, feed them broth and comfort them a little,"

Mrs. Marden persisted, still anxious to go.

"Not you, Alice," said her husband. "There are younger and stronger women, women without families."

"Why don't they get busy then? It's not like pioneer people to let their neighbors suffer and die untended."

"Someone will step in, Alice," said Mr. Marden soothingly, but he was beginning to doubt it himself.

These emigrants would face Indians, outlaws, wild animals, and the fury of the elements, but this mysterious malady made them cower back, fearful and helpless. Marden was a brave man, but no good in a sick room, and there were many like him. The women, whose natural job it was, were afraid of bringing back disease and death to their own families.

THAT evening, as usual, most of the unattached young males of the caravan were clustered about Nora Bell. In the flickering firelight, the St. Louis woman was undeniably beautiful and alluring, her red hair gleaming, her green eyes flashing, her voluptuous figure exciting and exotic. Poised and polished, sleek and sophisticated, she reigned like a queen over humble and devoted subjects, the rough, inarticulate men vying with one another for a smiling glance, a casual word from Nora Bell.

It was disgusting, Jill Marden thought, to see frontiersmen brought to heel by a perfumed creature from the fleshpots of St. Louis and the Mississippi River. A trollop who had no use for any of them, outside of Rodrill, Tom Carberry perhaps, and big Amos Stroud because of his leadership. Jill was relieved to see that Rod was not in attendance, not yet anyway, and Carberry was staying away from Nora as he had promised. Stroud was probably in conference somewhere with the gun-hands and strong-arm men, who assisted him in running the train.

Nora Bell was singing to a rapt audience, when Tom Carberry came to the Marden wagon, conversed pleasantly with Jill's parents, and took the girl finally for a stroll around the smoky firelit enclosure. Tom was not exciting like Rodrill, Jill reflected, but there was something solid and reliable about him, a quiet pleasure in being with him. He was better looking and nicer than Rod, but her affection for Tom was a kind of sisterly one, while for Rodrill it was a singing flame, a rapturous floodtide of feeling.

She could marry Tom Carberry, she knew, but not Rodrill. No room in his life for women, Rod said. Maybe it was the unattainable that intrigued her so, she decided ruefully.

"There's something brewing," Carberry remarked, after a time. "It'll break in the morning sure."

"I know, Tom," said Jill Marden. "Stroud wants to leave the Klenks, and Rodrill won't agree to it."

"Amos Stroud's got enough backing to control this train, Jill."

"They'll think twice before jumping Rodrill and Baldock though."

"He's tryin' to figure out the horsepower"

"Two good men," Carberry said. "But what can two men do against a whole crew? Even two like Rod and Baldy?"

They wandered into a deserted bend of the great circle and paused in the shadow

of a big Murphy wagon, well away from the nearest fire. Stars sparkled overhead in the thinly clouded sky, and a mellow rising moon rimmed the near cloud streamers with golden fire. They stood shoulder to shoulder, warm and friendly, awed by the vast sweeping beauty of the wilderness night.

"Why don't we get married, Jill?" asked Tom Carberry. "It's what I want more than anything. Our folks approve of it on both sides. What are we waiting for?"

"Time, Tom, I need a little more time."

"It's Rodrill," he said. "And a waste of time—for you. No woman will ever hold Roddy."

"I just want to be sure, Tom," murmured the girl.

"All right, Jill."

Carberry pulled her close in a loose easy embrace. Her mouth invited him, and Carberry pressed his own down with steady force.

Pleasant, Jill thought. *But not like Rod's kisses. It doesn't carry me away like Rodrill does. Still, it's sweet and nice, like Tom himself.*

SHE DREW away, and Carberry made no effort to hold her. "Let's walk along, Tom." Carberry nodded, his fair head silvered by moonlight. "That poor Klenk family," Jill said. "I keep thinking about them."

Near the Klenk wagon the air was tainted with the evil odor of illness verging on death, and Jill shuddered uncontrollably against Carberry. The mother and two younger children were in the wagon, the father and older boy bedded down beneath it. The sound of their breathing was a tortured moaning rasp, broken by hideous outcries of unbearable torment.

Jill Marden fled suddenly, dragging Carberry after her, chilled and nauseated, her skin crawling and her scalp prickling with horror.

"I understand now why people keep away," Jill said.

"It's worse when you see them," Carberry told her.

The girl shivered violently. "I couldn't stand it, Tom."

"Nobody can, I guess. Not even Doc Hulman. It's rough on the Klenks though."

They made a complete circuit, returning to the Marden Conestoga. The young men were still crowded around Nora Bell's stand, but she was no longer singing. Jill saw with dismay that Rodrill had taken her aside and was talking earnestly to her. Nora's bright copper head nodded as she listened. They were a striking couple in the crimson campfire glare. They made Jill feel small, shabby and insignificant, dissatisfied with herself and Tom Carberry.

The male audience did not like Rodrill's intrusion and monopoly of Nora Bell, but none of them wanted to stand up and face the big Southerner. Some had seen him use those guns, and all had heard about his prowess as a gun-fighter.

Rodrill went on talking gravely to the red-haired woman. Listening carefully, no longer smiling, Nora Bell's sober face took on a strength and character that Jill had never noticed before. At last they walked off together, Nora swaying with a dancer's grace beside Rodrill.

FIRED with unreasonable rage, hatred for Nora Bell and a hopeless passion for Rodrill, Jill Marden guided Tom Carberry between two wagons and outside of the ring. The moon, turning silver as it climbed, whitened the plain and laid a glittering path across the Platte River. The spicy smell of sage was on the air.

"What's the matter, Jill?" asked Tom Carberry, puzzled by her suddenly distraught state.

In reply the girl flung herself at him, locking her arms about him with surprising strength. She pressed her slim pliant body against him with desperate urgency and compelled him with her eyes. Jill Marden was lovely in the moonlight, her brown hair curling softly back from the wide brow, her eyes shining, lips partly open.

"Kiss me, Tom," she commanded.

Carberry obeyed eagerly. This time it was better, this time it set her blood to

coursing like liquid-fire, her heart to tripping like a hammer, her brain to reeling. Even so, Rodrill was with her, his vision burning in her mind, and it was like a knife in her breast to think of Rod in the expert embrace of that red-headed woman from St. Louis.

Tom Carberry lifted his blond head. "You're thinking of *him,* Jill," he accused mildly.

"No, no!" she cried. "I'm not, Tom. How could I be thinking of anybody but you. Kiss me again, Tom."

"Not this way, Jill. Not thinking of Rodrill. I don't want you that way, Jill. It's got to be all for me—or nothing."

"Don't you want to marry me, Tom?"

"Not just because you can't have Rod."

"Don't be foolish, Tom."

"I'm not, Jill. I'm being sensible. I won't serve as a substitute for Roddy or any other man. I want you, but not that bad."

Jill Marden turned away and stared at the Platte, rippling smoothly between its willows and cottonwoods.

They would be alone together now, mouths and arms interlocked, Rodrill and that worthless dancehall creature, that green-eyed vulture of a woman.

It was poison in Jill's throat, acid in her veins, a steel blade in her bosom.

"Let's go back inside, Tom," she said, at length.

Tom Carberry nodded politely, his fine face set and sorrowful. They moved in silence between the wagons, back into the huge enclosure. The fires were burning low, and many of the weary emigrants had rolled into their blankets. Across the way the groaning and screaming of the Klenk family made the night hideous.

IN THE morning the camp was up early, after a troubled restless sleep, with people and animals moving wraithlike through the cold grey mists from the river. Campfires cut red holes in the fog, the odor of coffee and bacon filled the greyness, and the travelers hastened through breakfast before sun up.

The Klenks were still alive, it was reported, and quieter this morning. Neither Rodrill nor the red-haired woman were anywhere in sight, and Jill Marden wondered if they had fled together in the night. It wasn't like Rod to run away from anything, but men did unpredictable things for a siren like Nora Bell.

Tension was heavy in the oval, apprehension rife, and pioneer faces were grim and bleak as the men buckled on their guns and checked their rifles, before packing up and harnessing the horses. Big Amos Stroud had said the Klenks were to be left behind, while Rodrill declared that they were to be taken along with the column. Both men had a large following among the rank and file, but Stroud with his gang of gun-sharps, was in a better position to dictate. The majority of the men were farmers, not gun-fighters. In a final showdown it was likely that Rodrill and Baldock alone would stand up against Amos Stroud's forces. Rod and Baldy were good, but hardly good enough to survive such a one-sided battle. The odds would be too long against them, overwhelming for any two men to face.

Jill Marden was relieved when Rodrill finally appeared with Baldock, the short squat ugly-faced Indian scout, and then terrified as the two men set about harnessing the Klenk horses. There was a general movement in that direction, the men drifting forward with carbines in hand or thumbs hooked into gun belts, the women trailing fearfully after them. Heads of families vainly entreated their females to stay back, but the entire camp was slowly converging on the Klenk wagon, a huge old Pittsburgh, the sick family all inside it now.

Jill and her mother fell into the procession, stocky Mr. Marden walking ahead of them with a rifle in the crook of his arm. Not far distant, Tom Carberry and his father were pacing side by side, followed by his mother, sister, and younger brother. Milling about the enclosure, men watched one another warily, each wondering which side to take, which side his neighbors would stand on.

A murmur went through the crowd as

big Amos Stroud came from his lead wagon with six swaggering hard-faced men at his heels, a murderous looking crew all wearing two six-guns and carrying army carbines. A lane opened for them to march toward the Klenk wagon.

Rodrill and Baldock had the team harnessed now, and were quietly watching the approach of Stroud's heavily-armed party from the lead wagon. Baldock, broad and stolid in his greasy buckskins, casually picked up a sawed-off shotgun and held it under his right arm, his eyes squinted to slits, his jaws moving slowly as he munched a chew of tobacco. Rodrill stood slouched in easy grace, fully relaxed, his strong hawk-face expressionless, his big hands hanging near the Colts on his thighs.

Big Amos Stroud halted about thirty feet away, his men fanning out on either side of him, a row of seven facing the two at the side of the Pittsburgh. Stroud's scarred face was all evil now, the eyes as baleful as those of some monstrous beast, the lips snarled back on his teeth.

"What you harnessin' that rig for, Roddy?" he demanded.

"The family's better," Rodrill drawled. "Well enough to travel, Amos."

"They ain't travelin'," Amos Stroud said flatly. "They're stayin' right here, Roddy."

RODRILL moved his head slowly. "Baldy and I figure different. Others do too. You'd better put it to a vote, Amos."

"Vote, hell! I'm givin' the orders here. I know what's best for this train. You want the whole outfit to get sick and die?"

"The Klenks aren't going to die. Unless we leave them here alone."

"They're as good as dead now. And so are you, if you don't stand aside!"

Rodrill smiled. "Quite a few'll die with us. Including you, Amos."

"We're seven to your two," Stroud said. "Don't be a damn fool."

Baldock chuckled, elevating the scattergun a trifle. "Them odds ain't bad, long as I got this little old baby here."

"You want the Indians comin' down on us?" asked Amos Stroud.

"The Cheyennes ain't out, Amos," said the scout.

"It don't take 'em long to start, Baldy. Once they spot sickness in the line. Once they catch us slowed down by the Klenks."

Rodrill said: "You've got no case, Amos. You just don't want to change your mind. It'd be murder to leave these people."

"All right, you and Baldy stay with 'em. We can get along without you two jaspers."

"I don't think so, Amos. This train paid for our help and protection. They're entitled to get it all the way."

"You ain't protectin' 'em!" sneered Stroud. "You're exposin' 'em to death by whatever black plague hit the Klenks."

"You're stubborn, Amos," said Rodrill. "It isn't always a sign of weakness to change your mind. It can be a sign of smartness, too."

Amos Stroud looked over the sea of frontier faces, but he could read nothing in them. He glanced at the gunmen who flanked him on either side. Some of the bold bravado and swagger had gone from them. They weren't too anxious to face Rodrill's six-shooters and Baldock's shotgun. They might kill those two, but they were most likely to die themselves in doing so. A setup like this was suicidal to both factions. Rodrill and Baldock would never back down.

Jill Marden was watching tensely, deathly afraid but filled to bursting with pride and admiration for Rodrill.

How could you help loving a man like that? But, she remembered, he belonged to that painted strumpet from St. Louis. Nora Bell, who was probably still sleeping blissfully after a night of rapture.

"Enough of this damn arguin'!" Amos Stroud roared. "Take 'em, boys!"

Rodrill's elbows went out, his hands spread into claws. Baldock's shotgun came instantly level and cocked, with an ominous click in the abrupt hush. Big Amos Stroud's enormous hands hooked the air close to his gun butts, and carbines were cocked along the row of seven. The tableau froze motionless, stark and deadly, trembling on the extreme edge of a terrible blast-

ing explosion. The sun came up red as blood in the East, its long level rays dispersing the last wisps of mist, lighting the massed tension within the circle of wagons.

The sun was straight in the eyes of Stroud and his crew, as Rodrill had planned, plotting and waiting for this moment of full sunrise. The lead-wagon men blinked and winced, wavered uncertainly in the direct red blaze, and even Big Amos Stroud, blinded by the glare, quailed briefly.

Precisely at that moment, Nora Bell appeared in the rear of the Pittsburgh, a small pistol in her hand pointing squarely at Stroud's massive chest, her green eyes flaring, her clear ringing voice lashing out through the breathless silence.

"Call off your dogs, Amos! Or you die in your tracks regardless of what happens to the rest of us. I shoot very straight!"

HUNDREDS of pairs of eyes gazed at her in astonishment, hundreds of mouths gaped in utter disbelief. Nora Bell obviously had spent the night in the Klenk wagon. Her face was drawn, haggard and stained, her red hair in disarray, her finery rumpled. The green eyes were sunken and infinitely tired.

Standing there at the tailgate, she swayed with weariness, but the gun in her hand was steady. The vile smell of the sickness exuded from her, polluting the morning freshness. All night she had endured that stench. The folks of the wagon train stared at her with awe and wonder.

"What you doin' in that pesthole, Nora?" shouted Amos Stroud.

"The crisis has passed," Nora Bell announced calmly. "The Klenks will live, every one of them. They'll need care and attention, of course. I'll see that they get it. There's nothing for the rest of you to be afraid of. Get the wagons rolling, Amos."

Rodrill smiled fondly at her. "Good girl, Nora. I knew you'd do it for us." He turned to the stunned wagon boss. "All right, Amos. Let's get them on the road."

Big Amos Stroud nodded dumbly, dispersed his gunhands with an impatient gesture, and stalked ponderously back toward the lead wagon.

Slowly, still awed and incredulous, the emigrants drifted back to their own wagons, but Jill Marden remained rooted there, her wide brown eyes fastened on the woman from St. Louis. The woman whom she thought didn't belong on a wagon train. The woman she had scorned as a useless wanton creature of ill-fame—Nora Bell, who had gone into the odorous hell of misery and disease, pulled those people safely past the climax, and no doubt saved the entire cavalcade. A woman in a million, whatever her gaudy past and dubious antecedents.

Nora Bell sank weakly back on the tailboard, and Rodrill stepped quickly to her side, anxious and solicitous, taking her gently in his arms, smoothing her tousled red hair, that was aflame with the early sunlight. Sudden realization and understanding came to Jill Marden.

Those two belonged together. They were the same kind of people, fearless, reckless, strong and wilful, wounded by life but unbowed, unbeaten, indomitable. They were grown up and matured far beyond herself and Tom Carberry.

Jill Marden wanted to tell them that she knew now, that it was right and just and fitting for them to be together, that she was glad and happy for them, wished them well all the years of their lives. But she didn't know how to do it, she was too shy and tongue-tied, and all at once she wanted to be with Tom Carberry.

She turned away to find him, and her mouth opened as if for a wild frantic scream.

But no sound came from it.

Big Amos Stroud had returned on the far side of the Klenk Pittsburgh, bent on wiping out the humiliation that had been forced on him in front of the whole train. Rounding the back corner of the wagon, Stroud set himself on wide-spread boots, his six-gun cocked and aimed at Rodrill's back.

Stroud spoke sharply and brought Rodrill spinning about to look death in the

eye. Stroud's mocking laugh boomed out, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

A TALL slim figure leaped out behind the giant trail boss. It was Tom Carberry, a long-barreled Colt raised like a hatchet. There was a sharp flashing arc as the steel whipped wickedly downward and beat the big man to his knees.

The gun exploded into the earth. Amos Stroud fell slackly forward, brutal face buried in the dirt, his great bulk sprawling loose and unconscious.

Rodrill grinned at Carberry. "Thank you, Tom. I'm getting kind of careless, it looks like. I'm sure obliged."

"It's you and Nora Bell we've all got to thank," Tom Carberry said with simple dignity. Then Jill Marden was in his arms, clinging to him as if her life depended on it, sobbing as if her heart was broken. Clumsily Tom tried to soothe and comfort her, while Rodrill and Nora Bell smiled kindly at them, and a new crowd gathered.

Tom Carberry was one of the heroes now, along with Nora Bell, Rodrill and Baldock. Walking away on his arm, Jill glowed with pride and happiness. She wanted to kiss him, but she couldn't in front of all those people. But tonight was coming, night with its friendly darkness secluding them, and tonight she would kiss him as never before. And this time there would be nothing between them, no other man in her mind, just Jill Marden and Tom Carberry. Together at last, as they should be, forever and ever.

As the wagons swung into line for the northwest trek toward Laramie, Rodrill rode up beside the Marden wagon, a splendid figure on his magnificent gray stallion, lifting his hat and smiling at Jill, who was alone on the driver's seat for the moment.

"We've got Stroud trussed up for a while," he said. "There won't be any more trouble of that kind."

"Rod, I'm sorry and ashamed," the girl murmured. "The things I said and thought about Nora Bell."

"That's all right, little girl. Nora doesn't mind those things."

"You two belong together, Rod. The finest man and woman in the lot."

Rodrill grinned. "I wouldn't go that far, Jill. But she is my kind of woman, and I'm her kind of man, I reckon. You and Tom fit pretty well, too, it seems to me. A mighty handsome young pair."

"Yes, I know now. Tom's the one for me. I'd like to help Nora with her nursing sometime. If she'll have me, Rod."

"Why sure, little girl. Nora'd be happy to have you help. She's quite a woman, that redhead. A lot of woman, Jill." Rodrill nodded gravely.

"She's the best pioneer woman of them all," said Jill Marden.

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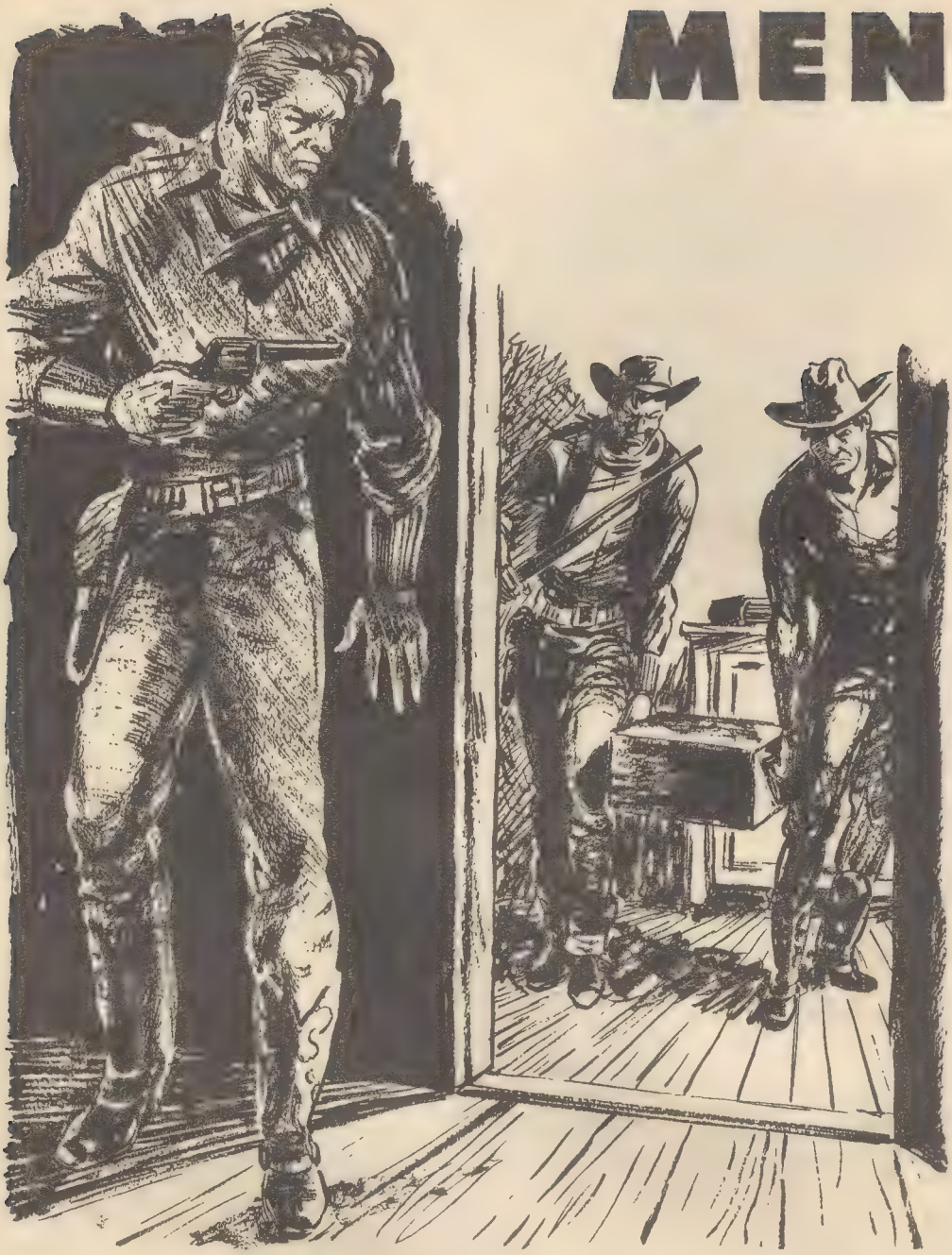


NO ONE COULD help Masters decide his course,

but there was someone to help if he chose right

on the MOUNTAIN

by PHIL RAY

HE RODE swiftly through the rolling country, carefully avoiding the thinly scattered ranch houses and any other signs of human habitation that he came across. It was the high country he headed toward now; the land of lava rocks and hidden caves, ragged buttes and deadfalls, the kind of country that was a natural refuge for the lawless.

Not until he had cautiously skirted the last lonely cabin in the wilderness did he slow his pace. Not until he had at last found the half-hidden, boulder-strewn trail that led tortuously upward did he take time to reflect upon his folly.

Because he was young and therefore foolish, because he was in love with a girl, he had tried to become rich the quick, easy way.

An unforeseen discovery had caused failure even in this. And now, back in Alturas, a tired old watchman lay near death with a bullet wound in his side. An old-time sheriff felt the pain and bitterness of loss, the loss of a young deputy who had betrayed a trust. And a young girl cried, feeling in her heart the greatest pain of all. These things because Wade Masters had been impatient and could not wait. Because a deputy's pay had been too small and did not permit a man to control his own destiny.

Though barely past voting age, physically Wade was a seasoned man, the product of a raw and vigorous country. He rode the center-fire rig with a straight back and feet slightly forward inside the five-inch stirrups, his full weight in the saddle, the way a California man should ride.

The last two days had been a hardship on him. The dust of a hard ride had settled over him and clung to sweat-soaked clothing. His eyes, deep-set to begin with, were sunken now and had lost some of their clearness. The slanted sun threw harsh shadows across his face. A growth of beard the color of river-bottom sand completed the gaunt look he had taken on.

The shadow of a hawk passed before him. Instinctively he tensed, drawing up on the reins. But the horse, weary from the hard ride, did not shy, in fact barely

noticed the fleet spectre. Masters looked upward at the floating bird. There was grace and freedom in its soaring flight. A freedom, he thought, which he could now never know.

Now the freedom of Wade Masters was in the high trails, in the brakes and the deep, hidden canyons; in the far away towns and in cheap, dingy hotels where no questions were asked. He saw his future thus—hiding and running away. For he knew he could not go back and face them.

There was not even possession of the money to ease his feelings in this. He pushed on, contemplating these things, unaware of the fact that he was watched, until the sharp explosion shattered the mountain stillness.

Dust spouted in front of him. The horse reared back, trembling.

Wade's right hand fell automatically to the walnut stock of the Smith. But he did not draw. There was no one in sight, nothing to shot at. He glanced furtively around him. Another shot could easily reach him before he could take to cover. He knew the shot had been a warning. The next one would be more than that.

Slowly he lifted his arms.

"That's right," a voice said. "Now come forward and keep your hands right where they are."

He pushed spurs gently to his mount and the animal moved slowly up the trail. They passed under a large, overhanging boulder, and the voice was behind them, uttering another soft warning. They went on fifty paces more. Suddenly the trail leveled off. Wade found himself on the edge of a flat meadow. A half-dozen hobbled horses grazed near by. In the distance he heard the soft, bubbling music of a mountain spring and became aware of the thirst that was in him.

Two men stepped out into the clearing. The younger, a heavy-set man with huge shoulders and arms that hung loosely from them like a pair of gnarled oak limbs, swaggered with the aggressive air of a man who feels deeply his own authority and his right to exercise it. Wade felt a sudden and violent dislike for the man when he took hold of the reins at the bit, jolted his horse to a stop, and ordered, "Get down."

AS WADE dismounted the man pulled the gun from Wade's holster and jammed it into his own belt. The other man, at least twenty years older than the first, was grey-haired and rope thin. He walked with a decided limp, and one arm did not hang exactly as it should. Across one cheek lay an old bullet scar. The man's eyes were as cold as steel and had an eagle's vigilance in them. There was a bloodless look to him, and Wade supposed that the man's spare frame had probably stopped more lead than he cared to remember. There was a faint amused smile about his thin lips when he spoke in a voice that was almost a whisper.

"Well, son, this is the top of the mountain. What do you think of her?"

Wade Masters glanced about. The heat pushed down oppressively here because the place was sheltered and there was little breeze. At the edge of the meadow were many natural caves with small openings in the lava rock. Ostensibly there was only one entrance to the flat. A perfect hideaway.

In answer to the old man's question he said, "It looks like a good place for keeping out of sight. Though I've had friendlier receptions."

The stocky man gave him a hard look. "Complaining already. Were you invited?"

Again Masters felt an aversion to this cool one. "I didn't invite you to take my gun," he said, keeping his voice steady.

The man lifted heavy eyebrows. "Oh," he said, "then I'll give it back."

He stepped forward quickly, bringing the gun up from his belt in a back-handed gesture. Wade lifted an arm to ward it off, but the heavy barrel caught him alongside an ear. He sat down. Shaking his head, he fought off the blackness that overcame him. He pushed himself to his feet, stunned and angry. A third man stepped in front of him, holding a rifle. Wade recognized his voice as the one on the trail.

"Now don't try anything," the man said quietly.

The one who had struck him looked at him arrogantly with a satisfied expression, as though he had relished the experience. It was the older one who spoke in his strange, half-whisper.

"Ike just wanted you to know who's boss," he said, his voice gentle, almost apologetic. "This country being what it is, we figure any man riding into it can only be one of two kinds. And we don't take any chances. Now Ike here is a certain kind and I am a certain kind. We want to know what kind are you."

Wade knew what the old man meant. These men were a breed he had dealt with before, but on his own terms. He knew well the shifty-eyed look of the one with the rifle, and the overbearing insolence of the man called Ike. In the distance were three others, two of them short, blond men who appeared to be twins. They walked toward him slowly, eyeing him with a stony curiosity. They both wore guns that hung at arms' length. The third was much younger, hardly out of his teens, but with a hunted look that was even more apparent, probably because he had not yet grown as hard as the others.

These are the breed of men you'll consort with now, Wade told himself. Renegades and robbers, even killers. Men who know no honor, not even among themselves. Men who live out their short lives looting and running; hiding at the sight of a strange face; trusting no one because even your friends, knowing you have something to hide, are potential enemies. Only, with you, it will be different because once you were on the other side. And sooner or later they will find that out. No one can say you didn't bring this on yourself. Answer the old man, Wade Masters. Tell him what kind of man you are.

He put a hand to his ringing ear and brought it away wet with blood. He looked again at the thin, bullet-scarred man. "I'm not the star-packing variety," he said, "if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean," the old man whispered.

But Ike was not satisfied with it. "I think I've seen you," he said. "Maybe it was in Reno. Or maybe down in Alturas."

Wade shook his head. "Neither place," he lied. "I only passed through those places once or twice."

"Then maybe it was over in the tule country. You're from these parts," Ike said with a quick glance at Wade's horse. "A man's rig always gives him away."

"Maybe," Wade said, "the rig doesn't belong to me. Maybe I borrowed it. Maybe a lot of things. I'm not asking you any questions."

"You're in no position to."

The old man stepped between them. "Leave him alone, Ike. You're getting jumpy." He extended a bony hand and Wade was surprised at its firmness. "True Hawkins," the man said. "I always figure a man is playing it square with me until he gives me reason to think otherwise. Of course, I keep my eyes open. And you'll be watched. Shuck your saddle and turn the horse out. There's water and graze for him here."

THE STREET was a wide, dusty lane, unpaved and lined with giant poplars on both sides. Dorris Collum sat in the afternoon shade of the wide porch which fronted the street. Beside her, her mother was making quick, deft strokes with the needle. There was a striking resemblance between the two women. Mrs. Collum's face was one of those that had been softened and gentled by the years and somehow retained a quality of youth. In a way she was even more beautiful than her daughter.

Dorris impatiently brushed back a stray wisp of brown hair. "I suppose I should hate him," she said.

"I suppose you should," her mother said. "But you don't and you won't, no matter what he does."

The girl stood up, leaned against the white, wooden pillar. "Mother, is it wrong not to hate him, even after what he's done?"

Mrs. Collum put her sewing aside. "It would be wrong," she said softly, "for you

to desert him now. He made a mistake. Soon he'll realize it and he'll come back. That is when he'll need you."

"Maybe he'll never come back," Dorris said. "Wade is headstrong."

The front gate squealed gently and a large, tired-looking man came up the walk. He was breathing hard as if he had been running, though he hadn't. A black cigar was clamped tight between his lips. He stepped up on the porch, removing his hat and revealing a thick shock of iron-grey hair.

Mrs. Collum smiled. "Good afternoon, Sheriff. Warm, isn't it?"

"Tolerable." The sheriff's voice had depth and resonance to match his big, heavy frame.

"I came to find out," he said to the girl, "if Wade has tried to see you. You would be the first one he'd come to."

Dorris shook her head.

"Anyway, I don't suppose you'd tell me if he had."

The girl looked up at him. "Sheriff, if he does come back would you give him another chance?"

The big man returned her look with steady grey eyes, a hint of strength in them. "It isn't up to me," he said. "I intend to treat Wade Masters like any other criminal. He attempted to commit a felony. In doing so he shot another man and that man may not live. If I see Masters, I'll arrest him. If he tries to resist me, I'll kill him."

Sheriff Coulter turned and his footsteps were heavy on the board walk. He took the side streets back to his office, not wanting to meet or talk to anyone. He was not young any more and this would probably be his last term in office. He had wanted a good man to support in the next election.

The people liked Ed Coulter. There was a good chance they would elect any man he backed. He'd been fond of Wade Masters, taught him everything he knew. Now this had happened. A good deputy gone sour. An old sheriff's hopes shattered.

He turned in at the office, closing the door softly behind him. He was startled to see the slender, middle-aged man in his chair with booted feet placed comfortably across the big desk. The man grinned at him. "Put on a little weight, haven't you, Ed?"

Recognition came to him and Ed Coulter rushed forward, a large hand extended. "Billy Frost! You old reprobate. It's been at least fifteen years."

Billy Frost stood, and the two men shook hands, clapping each other on the

"Wade," she said, "I knew you'd come back. I knew you would."

shoulder. Their greeting was warm; a meeting of old friends.

"Yes, sir," Coulter said again, "fifteen years at least. How are things in Texas?"

"Like always," Frost said. "The devil still holds a lease on hell and Texas."

The sheriff laughed deeply. It was good to see Billy again; good to be able to forget for a moment his troubles. He pulled open a drawer and produced a box of strong, black cigars. He offered them.

Billy Frost tapped his chest with a finger. "Thanks anyway," he said. "The old pump isn't what it used to be. I had to give them up."

"Too bad," Coulter said. "I have these imported for me. None like them in this part of the country." He chewed an end off one of the cigars. "What are you doing these days, Billy?"

"Same old thing. Still with the Rangers."

"You pleasure-bent or otherwise?"

"Business, I'm afraid. Got extradition papers for a bunch of renegades that gave us some trouble down in Texas. Ike Riggs and his gang. Ever hear of them?"

The sheriff shook his head.

"You probably will then. We had word that they were hiding out in these hills somewhere. A real tough bunch. We'd like to get our hands on them before they start giving you trouble. I may need your help, Ed."

The sheriff struck a match to his cigar. "Glad to give it," he said.

CAVE MOUNTAIN they called it because of the many natural caverns that littered the high country. It was in these that the men slept. They were dry and comparatively warm. Since he had stumbled onto this hideout there was little for Wade Masters to do but throw in with the men. At any rate, they would not let him go until they were sure of him. They still kept his gun.

Ike Riggs, he discovered, was the self-appointed leader, while old True Hawkins was, by persuasion and instinct, the real head. His hand was the restraining one, his voice the curb against which Riggs tugged and strained. Hawkins was aware of the fact that Ike resented him, and so interceded only when necessary.

Pete Clemm was the shifty-eyed one who seldom spoke. Wade learned that he was never without his Winchester and could knock an eagle off its perch at ninety yards. They called the kid Buster and it was to him that most of the dirty jobs were relegated. The kid seemed to worship Ike Riggs and did what he was told uncomplainingly.

Ike had sent the tough looking twins, Bob and Jim Crowders, to town. They returned four days later, leading two pack horses loaded with supplies and grain for the mounts.

Ike told Buster to unload the pack horses. "Give all the horses some grain," he said. "They're going to need it." He turned to the twins. "What did you find out?"

Jim Crowders dismounted stiffly. "The stage comes in from Boise Tuesday night," he said. "They lay over in Alturas. There'll be a box of dust from the mines."

Ike Riggs grinned. "Good. It'll be easy then. We won't even have to risk holding up the stage. Where do they keep the stuff overnight?"

Jim Crowders hesitated. "Couldn't find that out," Bob said.

Anger was a quick and visible thing in Ike Riggs. He scowled, his knuckles showed white. Jim Crowders eagerly defended himself and his twin. "We didn't want to ask too many questions, Ike. Folks might start thinking the wrong things."

"There's other ways of finding out," Ike said angrily.

"We know," the blond man said. "We kept our ears and eyes open. Everybody's talking about a deputy sheriff named Masters. Seems he tried to make off with some bank money. Only he got caught and had to light out in a hurry." He glanced uneasily toward Wade. "The sheriff wants to hang him if he ever gets his hands on him. We thought you'd like to know about that, Ike."

A slow grin spread across the stocky man's broad face. He turned to face Masters, the grin widening. "So that was where I'd seen you," he said. "It was down there in Alturas with a big shiny badge on your vest. Looks like you kinda disappointed them folks, Mister Deputy Sheriff. But I don't think you'll disappoint us. Maybe you'd like to tell us where they keep that little old box."

THE STAGE came through about once a month on its way to Sacramento. It was heavily guarded because of the gold from the mines as part of its load. Ed Coulter had always accepted the responsibility for its safekeeping. He would place the green, iron-bound box in one of the cell blocks. Always the first cell on the right as you went back from the office. The sheriff would lock the barred door and take the keys with him, leaving a man in the office all night to guard the box.

Wade Masters knew these things only too well and he knew that the stocky man standing over him was waiting to hear about them. The grin was an ugly gash across Ike Riggs' face. Wade felt a tormenting urge to wipe out all that barefaced insolence with a sudden, heavy blow.

You crossed Ed Coulter once, he told himself, you can't do it again. You've gone wrong, but not that far wrong. Tell Ike Riggs he can go to hell.

Riggs moved in closer, his arms swinging loosely like pendulums with ponderous weights attached to them. "I'm waiting," he said. "You going to tell us about it?"

"No."

Something hard and heavy struck him full in the mouth. Wade staggered back. He swallowed blood. Dazedly, he saw Riggs coming toward him again, felt the man's fist close about his shirt front. Riggs drew him close, and Wade sensed rather than saw his other arm raised. Wade let go a short, chopping blow, feeling deli-

cious pain shoot through his hand. Riggs tore part of his shirt away as he fell back, stumbled and went down.

The grin had left Ike Riggs when he looked up. Instead, his face held a pained look of surprise as he rubbed the side of his jaw.

"A scrapper," he said. "Let's see if you can make it worth my while."

He came to his feet again and moved in with the lithe movement of a stalking cat. Without waiting to see what he would do, Wade stepped forward and struck again. Riggs ducked under it, the blow missing him by a fraction. Wade followed quickly with an undercut that caught Riggs in the throat, raising his head with a jerk. Riggs grunted heavily and Wade lashed out again, realizing that speed and surprise would be his only defense against a man who had the advantage of greater weight and brute strength.

The big man fell back again, but kept his footing. He came in once more and Wade hit him hard. Riggs moved aside, letting it catch him in the shoulder and rolling with it easily. Then he struck and Wade saw it coming. The man's hard knuckles brushed across his forehead, taking skin with them. Wade retreated and waited for him to come in again.

HE KNEW Riggs was seeking him out now and that the man's mind was working with the precise clearness of an axman about to cut down a tree, deciding in which direction he will have it fall. Wade knew he had not yet hurt Riggs and that it would take three of his own hard blows to equal one of the other man's.

It came even before he realized. Riggs let him come close and took a full swing to the face which had all Wade's weight behind it. It would have dropped most men. Wade followed with another, coming in closer, and this time Riggs grabbed his wrist with both hands and jerked him forward. He was swung around and then Riggs let go his wrist. Wade whirled quickly, realizing that the man was behind him now. Riggs had his head lowered and was coming at him like a roaring avalanche. Wade side-stepped and the man's heavy shoulder caught him at the rib point. Wade's feet left the ground. He was caught and thrown heavily to the hard ground. His breath went out of him in a short, sickening gasp, and there was a nauseated feeling in the pit of his stomach. Desperately he tried to get air into his lungs.

A hand tightened itself about his collar and he was lifted again. He summoned enough strength to strike out and felt his knuckles bite into hard flesh. The grasp on his collar loosened and Wade fell back. He reached out and took Riggs down with him.

The stocky man was on top of him, breathing heavily. Wade tried to roll, but the other's weight pinned him down. A hard fist crashed down on him, sent his head rolling into the dirt. He reached out again, tried to hit Riggs. His arms were too heavy to lift. Again Riggs hit him in the face. A knee pressed hard against his groin. Sickness rolled through his body in waves.

Wade became painfully aware of the sun beating full upon his face, the heat unbearable. Then suddenly it seemed to explode and shatter in a thousand directions so that there was a blinding light he could not shut his eyes to.

A voice came to him from far away, yet it was loud and strident in his brain, and he knew that Ike Riggs was saying, "Will you tell us now, Masters? Will you tell us now?" Each time, when he did not answer, there was an explosion which rocked him back until finally he heard himself saying, "Yes," over and over again.

The oppressive weight left him. He rolled over and was sick in the dust. When he looked up True Hawkins stood over him, tall and lean, and he could not tell whether there was mockery in the smile.

"Ike is a pretty tough customer," the old man whispered. "Better to do like he says."

THEY descended the winding trail slowly. Pete Clemm rode in the rear, his Winchester in the scabbard. Ike and the kid, Buster, were up front. The

Crowders twins were directly in front of Wade, and old True Hawkins directly behind. It would be like that until this thing was over, Wade thought. They would keep him hemmed in, putting no trust in him until his complicity had insured it. Cave Mountain was behind them now The trail ahead was dim and precarious.

Hakins rode up to flank him. Coughing, he said, "I ran out of tobacco. You got the makings?"

Wade handed him the near empty sack. The old man rolled the brown paper with long, bony fingers and lit the quirly with a big sulphur match. "So you're a lawdog gone bad," he said, drawing smoke into his lungs with relish.

He said it casually, as if he were only striking up a conversation. "You ain't the first, though," he said. "Never knew of one yet that didn't go the whole hog once he'd jumped to the other side of the law."

Wade looked at him. Hawkins stared straight ahead. "Let's forget about that," Wade said coldly.

"All right." Hawkins coughed again. "Only I don't want to see you mess up this job like you did the first." The trail narrowed and he dropped back.

They camped in the willows on the upper side of a nearly dry creek. Ike Riggs was careful to keep his fire low. Tension drew the men into a tight knot of silence. Wade stretched out on the cold ground. The twins were on either side of him. They were watching him closer than ever now. He thought about making it to his horse. The mount was gentle. He could ride it bareback and with only a hackamore. But he knew at least one of the men would be awake. And he remembered the deadly accuracy of Pete's rifle.

He did not sleep that night.

They were traveling again before dawn, taking it slow, stopping occasionally, saving their horses. Darkness had again come when they approached the town. A few voices echoed down the long street and some lights were reflected from windows.

"It's early yet," Ike said. "We'll wait a while."

"Some of them places are still open," True said. "I'll ride in and get me some tobacco."

"You should have thought of that before," Ike said, but did not try to stop him.

"Won't be a minute," the old man whispered and pushed on toward town.

Wade was thinking of Dorris. He wondered if she would still accept him; if she would still feel the same, or if she had changed because of what he had done. He longed to see her, if only once more.

It would be a risk, but it would be one worth taking. "Riggs," he said, "you've got my gun and I don't dare show myself in this town because there'd be a hangman's noose waiting for me. But there's a girl—" He broke off, knowing it was no good. He wasn't going to ask Ike Riggs any favors.

But in the half darkness he could see Ike grinning. "Sure," he said. "You go ahead because I know you'll come back. But be sure you don't say the wrong things. Pete will go with you just to make sure."

Wade looked distastefully at the shifty-eyed Pete.

"I don't need a chaperone."

Riggs shrugged. "Don't go then."

He went and Pete Clemm followed close behind.

The man with the rifle waited in the shadows and held his horse while Wade dismounted and walked to the picket gate. There was a light burning dimly somewhere inside. He whistled softly.

SILENTLY the door fell open and light streamed out upon the walk. And then she was running toward him, her skirt making soft, whispering noises. She came straight to his arms, and for a breathless moment he held her closely, feeling the soft warmth of her against him, her hair across his cheek.

She drew herself away. "Wade," she said, "I knew you'd come back. I knew you would."

"Only for a little while," he said and looked down at her. She was smiling and the moistness of her eyes made them dance.

"For always," she said. "Wade, it's got to be for always. You can give yourself

up. I can wait, and you'll need me. Sometimes women can't help, Wade, but sometimes they're needed. I can help you in this."

"No," he said softly. "You don't understand how it is and I can't tell you. I'll be back, but only for you and not for them. I've given them too much for too little. I owe them nothing."

She was still looking up at him, the smile faded. "You owe it to yourself," she said. "The man you shot is still alive. They say he'll live now. That will make it easier for you. You can't spend the rest of your life running away." She drew back further. "Wade, you've changed. You're hard and tough and you're not made to be that way."

"I'll be back," he said. "On my own terms."

"If you go away again, there will be no one to come back to."

He pulled her close roughly, holding her arms tightly. "You mean that?"

"I can be as stubborn as you, Wade. I mean it."

He let go of her and she turned around, running back to the house, her head lowered.

He grabbed the reins that Pete held for him and mounted up. "Let's go."

Pete let out a low whistle. "You want to go easy with something like that. There's pay dirt there."

Wade Masters drew up. He felt the surge of anger coursing through his veins. "Pete," he said, "some day you are going to leave that rifle out of reach. When you do, you'll be sorry you said that."

Pete grinned. "Don't count on it, mister."

OLD HAWKINS came riding back from town a short while later. He chewed the end of a half-smoked cigar. "Couldn't get any makin's," he grumbled. "All they had was these damn stogies."

He offered one to Buster and the kid lit it, wanting to show that he was as much a man as any of them. The strong smoke made him choke and he coughed furiously. Hawkins laughed. The Crowders twins chuckled a bit uneasily.

Ike knocked the cigar out of the kid's mouth. "Cut it out," he told Hawkins. "This is no time for jokes."

True wheezed again through his constricted throat. "Ike, you always did get goosey before a job. Take it easy. Ain't a thing to worry about."

They waited until almost midnight. Buster gave each mount a hatful of grain and then they started slowly in toward town. Through the darkness Wade heard Ike's voice. "Which way will it be?"

"Straight ahead. Down at the other end of this main street."

The town had always been quiet on week nights and now it seemed to Wade Masters that there was not a person in it who took a living breath. Against the awful stillness the slow-moving hooves of their horses seemed to beat loudly, though Wade realized that in the soft dust they probably could not be heard a block away.

They passed the buildings with which he was so familiar. Over there on the left was the old livery barn where he used to work as a kid. From it came all the delicious smells of cured hay, tack-room leather, and the warm, rich odor of living horseflesh. It was dark inside and he knew that in there slept an old man who once called him "button" and, when he wanted to tease him, ran a stiff curry comb through his sandy hair. It was here that he'd first seen Ed Coulter and marveled at the shiny badge pinned to the man's broad chest.

They passed on. Up at the next corner was the gray stone church where he had first met Dorris Collum at a social; and where later he'd waged many a battle of wits and charm for her favor. Farther on down that street stood an old white house with a huge oak tree in front of it where he had stopped her and in the darkness had given her her first kiss.

Are you going to give up all these things for an uncertain future that might easily end with a slug of hot lead in your back or a hemp noose around your neck? he asked himself.

They rode on, the hoofbeats like a slow

roll of drums. True coughed and Ike Riggs turned in the saddle to whisper an angry curse.

Up ahead in the middle of the block stood the old bank building. That had been easy, hadn't it. Until the old watchman had suddenly come upon you and started to draw his gun. Too bad he hadn't been a little faster. You wouldn't be here now, riding down this dark street with a bunch of renegade thieves. You hadn't wanted to shoot the old man. But he'd asked for it.

They passed the bank. They were coming to the edge of town now. "Over there on your right," he said softly. "That low building with the tie rail in front."

Riggs drew up. "All right," he said. "Bob, you stay here. True, stay on the other side of the street where you can watch things. Jim, take the other end of the street."

The twin rode on down the wide street and the four others pushed ahead slowly. This was the crossroad. From here he took either one trail or the other.

This town never gave you a damn thing. You owe it nothing, was Wade's dark thought.

They pulled up in front of the building. It was dark inside. Riggs said over his shoulder, "Anyone in there?"

Wade shrugged. "I don't know. There should be."

They dismounted. "Pete and me will go in. You and Buster hold the horses."

Wade took the reins. "You still have my gun," he said.

"And I'll keep it till this thing is over."

The two men crept silently to the door of the office. Pete tapped against it lightly with the stock of his Winchester. They waited. No one came.

"Get out of the way," he heard Ike say. Pete stood aside and the stocky man took a step backward and hit the door with his full weight. He tried again, hitting it hard with his huge shoulders and this time the thin partition splintered and the two men walked in cautiously.

A thin breeze lifted dust in the street and whirled it gently about his ankles. A trace of cigar smoke was carried with the gust and came weakly to his nostrils. He knew that Hawkins was standing over there in the shadows, watching.

He thought of Ed Coulter. The sheriff always smoked those strong, black cigars. You went back on him once, he thought. And you're doing it again. He remembered what Dorris had said: Sometimes women can't help, but sometimes they're needed. I can help you in this.

A muffled blast came from within the building and Wade knew that they had broken into the cell block where the green box was.

Dorris hadn't known how impossible it was for her to help him now. If he was going to do anything, he would have to help himself.

He thought he heard a commotion at the end of the street. He turned to peer into darkness. The kid must have heard it too, for he had turned and stood there with his back to him.

Help yourself, he thought.

He clutched at the stock of the kid's gun. It slid easily from the holster. Buster whirled around, his mouth falling open in suprise. Wade brought the barrel up and brought it down hard against the kid's skull. Buster folded at the knees and dropped to the street. Somehow Wade felt sorry for him.

THE others were approaching now from the inner part of the building, their footsteps heavy and dragging. Wade stood to one side. They came through the doorway and he stepped out of the shadows, confronting them, the gun thrust forward so that they could see it. They were carrying the iron-bound box between them.

"Drop it," he said.

He saw the shock of it hit them. Ike had started to say something, but Pete dropped his end of the box. It came down hard on Ike's foot, and he struggled against the weight of it. Wade was watching him when the long muzzle of Pete's rifle came up.

Pete had the lever down and was bringing it up to throw a shell into the chamber

when Wade heard the sharp click. He pointed the revolver at the rifleman's chest. The gun bucked in his hand. Pete coughed spasmodically and bent double and went down. Wade heard Riggs cursing and before he could stop him the big man's knuckles rapped against the side of his head, and felt himself falling sideways.

He was down and trying to hold onto consciousness. Distantly he heard the staccato roar of other guns and the confused clatter of excited hooves. He shook his head, tried to push himself up. His arms had lost their strength, his head wouldn't clear. He wanted to let go, to let the comforting blackness cover him. He realized he was trembling. Another pounding of hooves roared in his ears and then began to fade in the distance. More shots. It was Riggs, he thought, getting away.

He felt around for the gun, but it was not there. It must have slid off somewhere in the darkness. The dead man lay beside him, a flow of thick blood slowly soaking into the dust beneath him. Wade took the rifle from the dead man's grasp, crawled to the edge of the street with it. Horses were milling excitedly, and through the confusion a man was running frantically, trying to catch one of the mounts. One of them was on its side, threshing. Another one came by Wade, reins dragging, and he grabbed for them, pulling the horse around. The animal reared and he pulled it down with a savage jerk. He hauled himself into the saddle and, keeping low, laid the beaded romal across the horse's rump, heading it northward out of town.

The breeze cleared his head. The road lay ahead of him, long and straight. Against the sky he could barely see another rider, crouched low in the saddle, making his way toward the far hills. Holding the rifle in one hand, Wade fired, knowing he would hit nothing. Again he used the romal and the horse leaped ahead in a burst of speed.

Riggs was hampered by the weight and awkwardness of the box he had taken with him. The distance between the two riders had begun to narrow when the man ahead turned off into a clump of trees. Wade did not follow immediately into the grove, thinking it might be a trick. The undergrowth was thick here and a man could not possibly make good time. He rode along the edge, listening for hoofbeats.

Several yards ahead of him, Riggs emerged and again hit the road. Wade shoved spurs to his mount and closed the short gap between them. Riggs turned, and seeing what was happening, suddenly drew up and whirled his horse around. Wade was unable to stop in time. The two horses came together headlong, spilling both men from their saddles.

They hit the ground simultaneously, the wind knocked out of them. Riggs was the first to recover himself and he dug for his gun with a violent clawing action that bespoke death for Wade Masters unless he moved fast. The rifle had been torn loose from his hand and was lost somewhere in the darkness. He came to his feet quickly and rushed in, desperate hands reaching for the gun that was leveled on him.

He got hold of the barrel, felt it burn his palm as the hot lead spurted out of it. He grabbed it with both hands, jamming a thumb under the hammer so it could not be fired again, and tried to tear it loose from Riggs' powerful grasp. Riggs hit him with his free hand and together they fell back, Wade still holding to the gun with both hands. They rolled together and came up against a tree trunk. Wade smashed Ike's big hand against the tree and Ike let

go. Wade was fumbling with the gun when Ike hit him again, catching his wrist and sending the gun hurtling off into darkness.

"That makes the odds even now," Wade said, breathing heavily.

IKE'S head was lowered, big shoulders hunched forward, and Wade knew the man was about to rush him. He remembered the beating he had taken before and when Riggs came in he was ready for him. The big man roared in like a mad bull, dry leaves and fallen branches making a sharp crunching sound beneath his heavy onslaught. Wade leaped nimbly aside and Riggs, having anticipated the move, changed his direction slightly and brought his head down. Wade lifted a knee, brought it up hard against the man's chin.

Ike's head snapped up, blood spurted from his crushed nose. He bellowed with pain. "Want to try that once more?" Wade said and moved forward.

Again Ike lowered. Wade grabbed the back of his neck with one hand and a thigh with the other. He shoved with all his strength. Ike stumbled forward, crashed headlong into the tree and slumped at its base. He lay still. Wade turned him over roughly and examined his battered face. Riggs would be out for a long time. Wade went back to the road, searching for the box. He found it in a clump of brush and bent to look at it.

Something rustled beside him. Out of the darkness came a drawling voice. "What do you aim to do with that, son?"

He straightened up quickly. True Hawkins stood before him, his wrinkled old face cracked into a wicked grin, a burnt-out stogie clenched tightly between his teeth. Wade started to move forward. Hawkins' gnarled old hand slapped at his side and came up with a gun in it. "I wouldn't," he said easily.

Wade stopped in his tracks.

"You haven't answered my question," the old man said. "What do you aim to do with the box?"

Wade took a step backward. "It goes back to where it came from," he said.

True holstered the weapon. "Maybe you'd better take a look at its insides first."

Wade hesitated.

"Go ahead. Bust it open."

Wade picked up a stone and smashed the lock. He poured out the contents. Dirt. Rocks and red dirt. He stared at it, unbelieving. No wonder it had been so easy to take it. There had been no guard in the office the way there always had been before. The job had been almost too easy. He recalled the commotion he had heard at the other end of the street; and later the other shots which hadn't seemed directed at him.

"They knew we were coming," he said, half to himself. "Somehow they knew."

"Somebody talked," Hawkins said and tossed away the burnt out cigar. It fell at Wade's feet and he stared at it.

HE LOOKED up again at the old man. "There's only one person I know of who smokes those," he said.

Hawkins grinned again. "Now you've got the idea. Me and Billy Frost have been a long time catching up with Ike Riggs. Working with him and his bunch was the only way we could do it. I've got enough on Riggs to hang him."

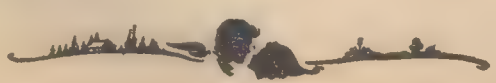
"So that's how it was," Wade said. "You could have told me. Would have made it easier if I'd known."

"Couldn't trust you," Hawkins said. "You took the wrong fork in the trail once. Didn't know if you'd do it again or not. When I seen you jump them I knew you'd made up your mind not to."

True nodded toward the slumped form. "How about it?" he said. "You want to help take this jasper back to town? Or were you headed the other way?"

Wade knew the old man was leaving it up to him. "All right," he said. "We'll take him back."

But he wasn't thinking of Ike Riggs just then. He remembered what Dorris had told him. He'd need her help now. And somehow he knew she would be waiting to give it.



Arbuckle Bill

By Col. Clarence B. Douglas

A true story of Okies of long ago, of their hardships and their triumphs

THE FIVE occupants of the rattling wagon that crossed the rocky ford of the Washita River that late September day were completing a trip that was to change the lives of all of them. And their lives needed changing. The wagon seemed on the verge of falling to pieces as it rumbled over the river trail. A sagging spring seat groaned under the weight of two men. Two women and a very young child sat inside on a mattress under a worn wagon sheet. In the mess box an assortment of steel knives and forks and tin plates added to the clatter of the noisy wheels rocking on worn spindles as the jaded horses crept along.

These were itinerant cotton pickers from the Red River section of Arkansas where that state joined the Choctaw Nation, Indian Territory—now Oklahoma. They were on their way to the Paul's Valley country, home of the thrifty Chickasaw Indians who operated large cotton plantations.

About an hour before sundown they picked their camp site, a spot just north and east of the Washita River where it roared through a canyon cut in the Arbuckle Mountains and around great boulders that had tumbled from the mountainsides. Along the river banks majestic forests led off to the rich farm lands that even then had made Paul's Valley famous for its agricultural products.

Of the men one was tall and lean and bony, with dead dark eyes that looked out

from under dark lashes, the other short and rather stout. Both were long-haired, both unshaven. The women had the look of sisters, though the wife of the tall man was young and clean and shapely. She was the child's mother. The other woman was angular and scrawny, her hair a tawny, uncombed mass. She constantly swabbed a short brush stick around an amber-colored bottle and then inserted it into her mouth. She was a snuff addict.

The day after making camp the men, riding their horses bareback, scouted the country to look for work. They came back with the unhappy news that the season was late and the cotton would not be ready for picking for several weeks. The food in the mess box was scant—just a slab of bacon, some coffee, meal, flour, salt and a jug of molasses.

At first their only visitors were some milk cows that wandered over from a near-by Indian land owner. One cow had a six-months calf that quickly became the playmate of the child. Then one day there came an Indian boy about ten years old, riding a paint pony and accompanied by a friendly dog, which made life full of fun and excitement for the youngster.

Meanwhile, though, food supplies dwindled, and still picking time didn't come. Finally the time came when it was necessary to make a trip to Winnewood for flour, snuff and tobacco.

There was no money for such things as meat or cornmeal.

The men hitched up the team and sent the women and child to town for supplies. They, they said, were going on a hunting trip.

When the women got back to camp late that afternoon, they were elated to hear that the men had run onto a deer, with a broken leg shot by some hunter. In the mess box and hanging from tree limbs was enough venison to last till cotton-picking began. The women weren't suspicious when the milk cow showed up the next day without her calf.

They even talked over the lost calf with the Indian boy when he came over with his dog.

RIDING Deputy U.S. Marshal Loss Hart, out of the Ardmore court, covered the Paul's Valley country and was always a welcome visitor in the homes of the Indian planters. Two days after the disappearance of the calf, Officer Hart, on one of his periodic rounds, rode into the camp of the cotton pickers. It was near meal time, and he was invited to set and have a bite.

The tall dark man told the story of the deer killing. The officer said it was the tenderest deer meat he had ever eaten and took a second helping.

Just then the Indian boy rode up with his dog and joined those around the campfire. Presently they all heard the loud barking of the dog a little distance away. Saying his dog had treed something, the Indian boy hurried into the direction of the sound. He was quickly followed by the officer.

From a shallow hole the dog had dug in the ground, the officer pulled forth the still damp hide of the young calf. The campers' child screamed, "That's the hide of Bossy's calf!". And things were now entirely clear to Officer Hart.

Turning toward the men, he barked, "You are under arrest!" Quickly he

"It's Bossy's calf!"

marched them back to camp, ordered them to hitch up. He told the women they had better come along so they could drive the team back. The men would not be returning.

After a brief hearing the prisoners were remanded to the U.S. Stockade in Ard-

more, to await grand jury action at the next term of court. Stoically the two men and the child drove back to the camp at the foot of the Arbuckle Mountains on the banks of the Washita.

SHORTLY before these two men were taken prisoner a young attorney, held on a serious charge, had written a brief code of laws and organized a kangaroo court in the Ardmore Stockade. A list of punishable offenses—such as fighting with a smaller man, failing to wash, stealing tobacco or other articles and a variety of other unsocial acts—was drawn up. Any man who violated the code was immediately indicted. He could demand a jury trial if he wanted one; otherwise the kangaroo court heard his case and rendered a verdict. Punishment ranged from three days indoors keeping the shack floor clean to twenty-five lashes on the bare back with a leather strap.

When the cotton pickers were turned in a clerk read the law code to them, and they were turned loose in the yard to take up a new mode of life. The tall man was quickly dubbed Arbuckle Bill in honor of his latest camp location, and Shorty was the name given his companion. Shorty quickly adjusted to his new situation and was soon engaged in a game of seven up in which the stakes might be anywhere from one to ten cigarette papers or possibly part of a sack of smoking tobacco.

Arbuckle Bill, tall, hairy, long-armed and big-footed, immediately became the target for the ridicule and nagging of the other inmates. Before court was called the first day he was charged with whipping five men, all of whom, though the aggressors, were smaller than Bill. That night Bill was convicted of five violations of the code, but the Judge, considering the circumstances, let him off with only five lashes.

From that time until the letter came, Bill was a constant worry to the Judge. Every day he was nagged and prodded; every day he fought—and usually won—a battle. He became sullen and defiant, and the Judge was afraid he had reached the mental state where he might do some serious injury to the pack constantly yelping at his heels. To the friendly gestures of the Judge he turned a deaf ear, apparently believing him to be just another enemy.

It was the letter from his wife that

He made up his mind to be a better man

marked the first break in Bill's attitude toward the Judge. He could neither read nor write, so when the letter with the Winnewood postmark arrived, he took it to the Judge to read to him. The letter was from Bill's wife, telling in misspelled language how the family was making out. The two women were picking cotton, and the Indian boy was the constant companion of the baby. The letter said the women would stay in camp until the court met in Paul's Valley, and they would be on hand the day of the trial. After this the Judge read and wrote the few other letters received and sent by Arbuckle Bill.

AMONG the prisoners was a strange character who wore a full beard and wavy brown hair reaching to his shoulders. On him constantly was all the clothing he possessed—a cheap dark shirt worn outside of frayed trousers the color of the ground and held at the hips by a belt. During the day he rarely spoke and

stayed as much alone as possible. But at night he grew animated and was the first to start the religious songs with which the men usually ended the evening. He'd also preach a religious sermon that seemed to have no beginning and no end. Because of this he was known as the Parson and thought of as a harmless fanatic to whom anger would be entirely foreign.

As a matter of fact the Parson was awaiting trial for first-degree murder, having shot and killed a man in his small second-hand store.

As time went on the Parson's sermons and songs began to make an impression on Arbuckle Bill, as they had on other inmates. It was not unusual, at the height of the worked-up frenzy, for some Negro or Indian to "come through" as it was called, and answer the Parson's plea to come forward and give him his hand as evidence that he loved Jesus and wanted to go to Heaven.

It was about then that Bill got another letter from his wife telling of the illness and death of his little boy in the camp on the Washita. The letter said the woman had sent the Indian boy to town for a wooden box. Using this for a coffin, they had crossed the Washita at the ford, carried the box up the mountainside above the high water mark, and in a shallow grave laid the baby to rest. The Indian boy and his mother had been kind, but the doctor the Indian woman had sent had arrived too late. Now they were living in an unoccupied house lent them by the Indian woman and would stay there until court time.

It was stormy the night after Bill received that letter, and the Parson led a particularly animated religious service. When it was over Bill told the Judge he had made up his mind to be a better man and wanted to be baptized. The Parson shouted with joy over another sinner saved. Bill was sprinkled from a tin cup to the flash of lightning, the crash of thunder, the howling of winds, and the frantic shouting of the prisoners.

The storm subsided, and a full moon came through the clouds. The singing died out at the guard's call of "Pipe down!" and another day was done for the men of many races awaiting their day of trial.

THE SCENE so impressed the young attorney serving as Judge of the kangaroo court that he wrote a poem describing the affair, and this poem became important evidence.

At the trial of Arbuckle Bill and Shorty in Paul's Valley in the late fall, the attorney appointed by the court to defend them asked for a severance, and Bill was tried separately. He was put on trial first, the charge being the theft of a calf. The testimony was conclusive, and conviction seemed certain. But Bill's lawyer got before the jury the poem about Bill's hard luck, the death of his baby and his obvious desire to lead a better life. Bill was acquitted. Later, Shorty was convicted and given a three-year sentence.

When the court moved to the Parson's home country, his case came up for trial. The evidence showed that he had shot and killed a man in his little store after loud language which had been heard by persons passing. The same attorney who had defended Bill defended the Parson. Again the poem was got before the jury with the argument that the defendant could not be a bad man when he had worked so hard to save souls. The old man testified that the shooting was accidental, and the jury gave him the benefit of the doubt. The Parson, too, was acquitted.

Bill and the two women had attended the Parson's trial. His store had been looted while he was in prison. Now he had no home, no business, and no money. Bill asked him to go back to Paul's Valley with the pickers, and he gratefully accepted.

With the money from a few weeks' work in the Paul's Valley cotton fields the party bought supplies and some new clothes. Then, their team fattened on the lush grass of the valley, their wagon repaired and spread with a clean canvas sheet, they took the back trail to Arkansas. Later the report came back that Shorty's wife got a divorce on the grounds of his conviction of a felony and was soon thereafter led happily to the altar by the singing Parson.

GRAND PRIZE

By Ray Palmer Tracy

SOMETIMES the grand prize turns out better than a man expects

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AT THE local rodeo at Hardesty, Blacky Farum, perhaps the best top rider ever produced in Buckaroo Valley, was outclassing his nearest rival, Norm Bross of the Bross Polo Pony Farm. He was making what everyone conceded was the final and winning ride on Jim Foreman's worst bucker, Black Angel. Then the savage outlaw horse suddenly lunged through a fence and somersaulted.

When Blacky came back to consciousness in the little Hardesty hospital, his chief regret was that he had lost out to Norm Bross. He had no idea that the important part of Blacky Farum had been killed back there in the arena.

The thought of soon being back in the saddle sustained him through hours of racking pain and kept his face cheerful for the swarm of visitors that came to the hospital—the first week. It bolstered his morale when visitors ceased coming, save for the daily visits of Nada Slocum.

Nada was only fourteen, red-headed and in that interesting stage of girlhood when they try to act so grown up but constantly are betrayed by kiddish tricks. But there was one mature spot in this girl who was promising to bloom into a blue-eyed beauty. She had adored Blacky Farum ever since she could remember. It was more than his shining raven hair and glowing black eyes, or even his seemingly effortless riding. Something in her recognized unsounded depths in Blacky.

Blacky had no idea of this worship. Why would he? At the elderly age of nineteen, a fourteen-year-old youngster was beneath his notice. But he was grateful for her daily visits. They shortened the lonely hours.

Of course it was hard for a grown man to talk to a kid like Nada. But Blacky feared she might lose interest and stop coming. He tried to be entertaining.

"You know my folks left me the ranch at the head of the valley," he said one day while casting about for a topic. "Know what I'm going to do with it?"

"No. What?"

It was more Nada's bright interest than his own that caused him to detail his plans. His purpose of keeping her entertained was being served.

"Buckaroo Valley has always been a place to raise horses of every kind," he said. "The mill run of horses are losing their market to cars and trucks, but the demand for polo ponies and buckers still keeps up. Always will."

"It costs an awful lot to get started breeding polo ponies," commented Nada.

"Too much for an ordinary guy like me," agreed Blacky. "But not buckers. I aim to stock buckers. Besides furnishing rodeo stock, it would give me a chance to practice to win the grand championship saddle at Pendleton one day." His great, secret ambition slipped out so naturally, he didn't notice he had bared the thing he had set his heart on.

"Rodeo contesting is a hard life," Nada said. She hesitated a moment, and then added, "I've heard folks say your father would have got rich, if he had gone into the sheep business instead of horses. The ranch is just suited for it."

Blacky laughed, although it made him wince as the pain gripped his back.

"You, too!" he chided. He could laugh it off because she was just a kid. She didn't know how to estimate the real values in life. One thing bothered him long after she had gone. He had seen tears in Nada's eyes. Why? Well, kids were funny. He would have shrugged, only he didn't dare. It hurt to move.

IT WAS Norm Bross who told Blacky that he was dead, killed in the arena by Black Angel. Norm had come up with the noisy gang that had called on Blacky as soon as Dr. Slocum would let them. He had managed to be politely sympathetic then. It was different several weeks later, when he came again. This time he was alone. He sat in the visitor's chair and stretched himself luxuriantly.

"It was too damned bad you had to have that accident on Black Angel," he said. "You know, Blacky, I've run into four or five folks who actually figgered you had a chance of winning first." He paused and gazed at the ceiling, his face expressing astonishment over such dumbness. "Kind of puts a blot on my win," he went on. "I'd much rather you had finished on Black Angel, if you could have finished. I hate these contests that don't end clean cut."

Blacky could now turn in bed without hurting—much. He rolled enough to give Norm a sardonic grin. Norm was good-looking with blond hair and grey eyes. He was taller and bigger than Blacky. Yet in high school, Blacky had defeated him in every sport, something that had filled the heir to the Bross Polo Pony business with jealous fury. Blacky grinned because he knew why Norm was talking as he was.

"Yeah?" Blacky questioned. "I see your

point. It was like when we were running the hundred down to LaGrande High, the time I was six feet in the lead, ten feet from the tape, and stepped on a stone that threw me. I remember the paper came out and stated that you had won by accident. Disgusting, ain't it?"

Everyone but Blacky knew he had been killed in the arena. But all visitors had been cautioned not to tell him. Norm had also been cautioned. It was his jealous rage that spoke out.

"Too bad we'll never be able to settle who's the top rider," he said in a tight tone. "Doc Slocum tells me you'll never be able to ride again!"

Dr. Slocum was just coming in the door and heard Norm retailing the forbidden verdict. He rushed in, grabbed Norm by the arm and yanked him to his feet.

"Get out of here!" he yelled. "Get out of here, you, you—" He couldn't think of a name that fitted.

"Sure I'll get out," said Norm, turning away. "I only repeated what everyone knows. You ought to be ashamed to keep it from Blacky." He went out the door, his high-heeled boots making soft sounds on the rubber runner down the hall.

Blacky watched Dr. Slocum, first with a laugh on his lips, then with puzzlement, next with fear and at last with downright panic. The doctor, his round face deeply distressed, refused to meet his eye. He looked all around the room. At last, in desperation, he faced Blacky.

"I warned him not to tell you," he said.

"You—you mean it's true? I'll never ride again?" whispered Blacky, not believing his voice was asking the silly question.

"I'm not God," said Doctor Slocum. "I only know that when I put you back together, a nerve got pinched somewhere. It does something to your back and left leg. It may clear up. Perhaps not. Till it does clear up, any time you ride a horse off a walk, it might finish you."

MEN nineteen years old don't cry, but something suspiciously like tears was stinging Blacky's eyelids. His face screwed up as it did when he was a child running to his mother with a hurt.

"If I can't ride, what is there left for me to do?" he choked.

"Remember I said it might clear up," said the doctor.

"But if I can't ride, what can I do?" asked Blacky again.

"I couldn't ride a rocking horse," replied the doctor. "Yet I manage to get a lot of satisfaction out of my work. I even feel a little puffed up at times, when I perform a near miracle, like I performed when I put you back together."

"Why didn't you let me pass out?" demanded Blacky. Other work might do for the mill run of folks who couldn't ride, but not for Blacky Farum. He had tasted the cup. Nothing else would serve.

"You should do a lot of walking." The doctor ignored the question. "It might loosen up that pinched nerve. Again, the right kind of a jolt might cure it, only you don't dare chance that. Why don't you cross the divide to the sheep country and get a job herding sheep for a time? That way you could get the proper treatment while you earned your way."

The doctor meant well. He just didn't understand how insulting he was to suggest that a top rider go to herding sheep. Only Blacky's helplessness saved the doctor from violence.

"Get out of here!" he croaked furiously. He turned his face to the wall, and the doctor went out, sadly shaking his head.

Lying there, entertaining his black thoughts, Blacky remembered the way he had confided his ambitions to the child, Nada. She had suggested sheep for his ranch. Of course! Nada had known then that he would never ride again. What was this? A conspiracy to degrade him? In his anger he made a quick move and pain shot up his back.

Waiting for the pain to go away again, he suddenly remembered the expression on Nada's face when he had been telling her of his plan to keep in practice by riding his own string of buckers. There had been tears in her eyes. And they hadn't been tears of pity. He knew that, somehow. They had been tears of deep sympathy. In

her childish way she had been trying to give him courage, and he was grateful.

Blacky couldn't bear to have people call on him now. No matter what they did or said, he read it as pity. He raised such a row, Dr. Slocum finally consented to let him go home.

In leaving the hospital, Blacky couldn't even ride his pony. The doctor took him in a car and reluctantly left him brooding in the old home where he had been born.

Blacky had been thinking of suicide, but as he moved carefully about tending to his few wants, there was one ray of light that kept peeping through the clouds. The doctor said there was hope if he walked a lot. The doctor's suggestion that he get a job herding sheep kept coming to his mind. Again and again he rejected it as beneath his notice, but it kept coming back. His long stay in hospital had cut deeply into his slender capital. He had to have money from somewhere.

"It really is nothing but medical treatment according to the doctor's orders," he buttered up his pride as he crossed the divide into sheep country.

The pain in his back was now confining itself to occasional sharp reminders that he was not like he had been. His left leg no longer ached, but there was a decided hitch in it when he walked. Sometimes in his sleep, if he made a wrong move, he would wake up with the sweat standing out on him. Then he had to wait with what patience he could muster for the pain to retreat.

Once Blacky got a herding job, he clung grimly to what he stubbornly called, "My treatment." A red letter day came in his life when he got well enough so he could mount and ride a gentle horse. But he was getting impatient. He had been with the sheep two years and still he was not cured.

Long ago he had discovered that sheep were stock and interesting, even if they didn't compare with horses. If this was going to drag out, he decided he might as well own his own sheep. An opportunity came. He bought six hundred old ewes and took them across the divide to his ranch.

DURING the next four years, while Blacky prospered financially to a degree that amazed him, there was one thing about being home he didn't like. On the other side of the divide, among sheepmen who had little interest in rodeo competition, he had seldom heard Norm Bross mentioned. In Buckaroo Valley, during the season of rodeo contests, he heard little else.

Norm had been contesting at Pendleton for the past three years. Each year at his send-off party in Hardesty, he boasted that this time he would bring home the grand prize saddle. Somehow he kept missing.

"If he ever does, there'll be no living in the same valley with his swelled head," was Blacky's private thought.

Each year, Blacky swore he wouldn't attend Norm's going-away celebration before he started for Pendleton. And each year it drew him like a magnet. He had to touch the fringe of the horse world. It was in his blood.

This year, Blacky really made up his mind not to go. He didn't admit that Nada Slocum being chosen queen of the celebration and the one to present Norm with the good luck symbol of the valley, had anything to do with his decision. Nada had fulfilled the promise of fourteen. She was a beauty to rave about.

Blacky wouldn't admit that he was in love with Nada and had been since he had discovered the cause of her tears that day in the hospital. A girl like Nada, now she had grown up, wouldn't be interested in a cripple and a sheepman at that. So why hurt himself? Carefully he kept away from her.

Yet, as the morning of the celebration wore on, Blacky weakened. Finally he gave up, got his car and drove down to Hardesty. He parked in front of the bank and walked the two blocks to the little square where the bandstand stood and where the ceremonies were taking place.

The crowd was on the east side of the bandstand. West of it, lined up like artillery and just about as dangerous, were the trucks loaded with Jim Foreman's buckers. A little apart, but also in line, like a ser-

geant commanding the others, was the ornate truck bearing the sign of the Bross Polo Pony Farm and containing Norm's proud mount. The shining horse gazed appreciatively at the crowd openly admiring him.

Norm was in the bandstand along with Jim Foreman, Mayor Neil Samuels, the officers of the commercial club, and Queen Nada Slocum. Norm, wearing a yellow silk shirt, looked the part of a champion. Jim Foreman, small and bandy-legged, appeared like any valley rancher, save for the extra shrewdness in his deepset eyes. He made a fine foil for the hero of the day.

Envy hooked sharp claws into Blacky. As always he wished he hadn't come. A few minutes more and the eulogies were over. Queen Nada was coming forward to present the good luck buckaroo tie clasp.

Norm took the trophy, reached his arm around Nada and drew her close to his side.

"I accept all this with thanks," he said.

Everyone laughed and cheered except Blacky. His scowl thickened as he noticed that Nada made no effort to break away. She stood there, her red hair contrasting vividly with the yellow silk on Norm's shoulder, her lips parted in a smile and her blue eyes friendly.

A moment they stood that way. Then Nada gently disengaged herself.

"I don't go with the silver buckaroo," she said.

"Playing hard to get, eh?" demanded Norm, raising his brows. "We'll see about that when I get around to it," he ended with the careless confidence of a man riding the crest and knowing his own worth.

WHEN the ceremony concluded, all crowded around the convoy of trucks to wish Norm and Jim the best. That is, all but Blacky. He hated himself for his childishness, but there it was. Or perhaps he knew too much about Norm. He saw Bill Bross heading his way.

Norm's father always made it a point to hunt Blacky out. He was not only an older edition of Norm in looks, but he had the same manner. Blacky always had the feeling that Bill Bross hunted him out to do a little gloating. This time he pretended not to notice Bross and moved away.

"Hey! Blacky!" shouted Bill.

Blacky couldn't pretend he didn't hear. "Yeah?" he questioned, stopping and half turning.

"I want to talk to you, Blacky," Bill said with a manner Blacky recognized as the one Norm employed when he really wanted something. He was so intrigued, he forgot to scowl.

"Go ahead," he invited.

"We've always been good friends, Blacky," Bill said, his open smile indicating his sincerity.

"In a way, yes," agreed Blacky and wondered to himself, *Now what in the hell is he after?*

"You know I've been breeding quarter horses as a side line to polo pony stock," Bill went on. "I find it's taking up too much of my time. So I'm going to go out of the quarter horse business. I'm going to sell my stallion, Hamad II. I'd like to place him right here in the valley."

"You mean you're going to sell the show saddler you used to exhibit everywhere until he suddenly went haywire and piled Norm a couple of times?" inquired Blacky innocently, knowing very well that was the horse.

A little strain came into Bill's smile as he struck back. "That's the reason I thought of selling him to you. You couldn't ride him with that back of yours, even if he hadn't gone haywire, and it would put you in a profitable horse business."

Blacky was so intent on trying to find the joker in this, he did not notice the jab. Must be true, that rumor he had heard that Bill Bross had made a bad investment and needed money. But why come to him? With almost a sense of shock he recognized the ready answer. It was known that he had the money. It gave him a tremendous lift. And he would love to own Hamad II.

"The price would have to be down where I can afford him," he said indifferently.

Bill named a price and watched Blacky carefully.

Sure of his ground, Blacky merely shrugged. Slowly the price went down util Bill was sweating.

When Hamad II was a real bargain, Blacky closed.

"I'll be down in a day or so after him," Blacky said and watched Bill walk away without his usual swagger. Blacky started for his car and was surprised to meet Nada. He didn't see how she happened to be there. Seemed to him she ought to be with the crowd fawning on Norm Bross.

"I saw you in the fringe of folks in front of the bandstand," she greeted. "You looked as though you were sore at me. And why have you been avoiding me?"

"I haven't been avoiding you," lied Blacky. "Just haven't been to town. As for the way I looked today. I *was* sore—sore and jealous."

Nada's serious expression brightened until she sparkled. "Yes?"

Nada had known his ambitions since the day he had turned himself wrong side out in the hospital. He didn't have to pretend with her.

"You know the answer," he said. "If it hadn't been for Black Angel, I'd be going to Pendleton along with Norm to ride for the grand prize."

"Oh!" It was a flat little sound, and the brightness faded from Nada. "I've got to go back to my job of being queen." Abruptly she turned away.

Blacky watched her go with a puzzled frown. She was acting offended. He wondered why. There seemed to be no reason, yet it bothered him as he drove home.

THE NEXT day Blacky saddled his gentle pony and went after his new horse. He put Hamad II in the big corral and sat on the fence in lonely pleasure to admire him. Too bad Norm had spoiled him. One of the best saddlers ever in the valley, ruined.

Blacky wanted to fork Hamad II so much his mouth watered. The fact that Norm couldn't ride him didn't mean anything to Blacky. If he hadn't been hurt, he was sure he could bring Hamad II back into the fold as the valley's greatest saddler. Anyhow, the horse was his, even if riding him was out.

The gentle pony Blacky used to get about his range was terrified of the powerful stallion. Feeling sorry for the pony's fear and not needing him for a time, Blacky took him down to his lower field and turned him in to feast on clover rowen.

Long ago Blacky had arrived at a stage of affluence where he hired a herder. Now it was time to pack a few supplies to the sheep camp. In fact, Blacky had arranged it that way, so he wouldn't be tempted to go down to Hardesty and torture himself by hearing everyone and his dog barking over how Norm was making out at Pendleton. He didn't return to the ranch until the day after the finals. His phone was ringing when he entered his house. He took down the receiver.

"Hello," he greeted.

"Where the hell have you been?" demanded the voice of Mayor Neil Samuels in friendly irritation. "I've been ringing you practically steady since yesterday afternoon.

"Up to sheep camp," said Blacky. "What's biting you?" He braced himself against what he had a hunch was coming.

"Norm Bross won the grand prize at the Pendleton finals yesterday."

"Who had an accident and let him win?" asked Blacky before he could stop himself.

Samuels chuckled with altogether too much understanding. "How'd you know?" he asked. "Hats Mason's horse fell with him and broke his leg. Hats was in the lead till then."

"Thanks for calling me up and giving me the news."

"Wait a minute. Where's your sheep camp?" the mayor asked.

"On the Wolf Hollow Divide."

"Then Park Canyon on the west side of your range is clear and clean?"

"Yes."

"We want your permission to use it for a picnic Hardesty is planning to throw to celebrate the homecoming of the valley's first grand prize winner."

It looked like adding insult to injury to be asked to furnish a picnic ground in

honor of Norm Bross, but there was only one thing he could do.

"Sure. Help yourselves," he agreed.

"How's that old logging road up the canyon?"

"Trucks can make it easy enough. I wouldn't try anything else. When you going to stage the whinding?"

"Friday. There'll be speaking, lots of food, games and everything, including the saddle to admire. You'll be there, of course."

Blacky grunted something deliberately unintelligible and hung up. He had no intention of going.

THE DAY of the picnic, trucks loaded with gay revelers rolled up the highway and branched into the old logging road up Park Canyon.

One truck detached itself and came up the road to Blacky's house where he was working in the yard. He wasn't surprised to find Norm in the truck, or Nada with him.

Norm wouldn't pass up such a golden opportunity to rub it in.

When the truck stopped, the grand prize winner waited for Blacky to do the proper thing and congratulate him. Instead, Blacky grinned wickedly and gestured to where Hamad II was watching them over the corral fence.

"I hear you've been practicing up on your riding," he said. "Think you've got good enough so you can ride Hamad II now? I hear he's piled you twice."

"I can ride Hamad II or any other horse!" snapped Norm furiously.

"I've got a hundred that says you can't cinch that prize saddle of yours on Hamad II and stay in it."

"Stop it!" Nada interfered. "Norm didn't come up here to ride today. We came up just to make sure you were coming to the picnic. I've already drawn you as a partner in the scavenger hunt." She didn't add that she had arranged the scavenger hunt herself. Before he could make an excuse, she called to the driver, "Clem, drive on. I've got to get to the picnic grounds among the first to see everyone doesn't park his truck right where we plan to eat."

Blacky watched them go. He wasn't at all proud of himself for needling Norm. He just couldn't seem to help it. As for the picnic, that was out. He had seen Nada snuggled in Norm's arm once, and that would do for all time.

As the sound of the last motor exhaust died between the walls of the canyon and silence settled over the ranch, Blacky began to weaken. It looked churlish of him not to attend the picnic, after his special invitation from Nada. He fought a losing battle with himself. If he must go, he decided to make sure the fawning on the hero was finished before he arrived, even if he missed out on the eats.

Blacky went into his barn and worked on a new box stall he was building for Hamad II. When he thought it was time to go after his pony and ride up to the picnic grounds, he put away his tools. Quick as he stepped into the open his startled gaze went to Park Canyon.

A dense smoke was rolling up in the second-growth timber in the mouth of the canyon. He could see bright tongues of flame leaping high.

Some careless smoker had flipped away a burning cigarette butt, or maybe a spark from a truck exhaust had set fire to the tinder-dry needles of the lower canyon. Making its own draft, the fire would be drawn up the canyon to the picnic grounds with racing speed.

Blacky stood thinking fast. The smoke would roll on ahead and warn the picnickers, but they wouldn't know they were already cut off. The natural thing to do would be to load up the trucks and make a run down the canyon. They would have just about time to reach the narrows where there would be no possibility of turning the trucks around, when they would meet the fire.

There was a way out of the upper canyon. Once, moving his sheep after rain had turned the lower canyon boggy, Blacky had driven his pickup, loaded with a camp and supplies, up a side draw to the shale flats, along Desolation Ridge and down to

Squaw Creek, where another old logging road led to the valley.

He doubted if anyone among the picnic crowd would know about that escape route, or would try it if he did, not knowing the better road was now a deathtrap.

BLACKY'S pony was nearly a mile away. Never in the world would he be able to get him in time to take the only Pine Slope crosscut and beat the fire to the junction. Turning, he looked at Hamad II, his head over the fence, watching.

Only a little while ago he had tried to trap Norm into trying to ride the stallion. Now it was up to him, a crippled man. If he was going to save half the population of Hardesty with Nada Slocum among them, he had to ride Hamad II. His left leg hitching, he hurried to the corral.

Swiftly he saddled the stallion, who stood perfectly still while it was being done. He led the horse out of the corral. If he failed in this attempt, it was better for the horse to be free to go back to the Bross Polo Pony Farm. His merely being there saddled would do it.

Blacky knew he was a fool to get on the horse. He hadn't a chance in a million. Yet he had to try. Unless he made the attempt he would never be able to stomach his reflection in a mirror.

Resolutely he swung into the saddle and settled himself. He spoke to Hamad II, and great horse started off. For a hopeful moment, Blacky thought the stallion was going to let him get away with riding him. Then, with explosive suddenness, Hamad II swallowed his head and went into the air.

At the first jolt when the great horse came down, Blacky nearly fainted. A terrible pain shot up his left leg and into his spine. It was like a searing streak of lightning, and it was gone just as swiftly. Now he didn't feel anything at all.

"Something busted and numbed my back," he thought. "If it will only stay that way so I can stand it to finish this job!"

All alone, with no one to witness the battle, Blacky and Hamad II fought it out. The memory of some insult was driving Hamad II. When he figured he had done enough to square that, he could quit. It was different with Blacky. He had to ride the horse.

Blacky could taste blood that was running out of his nostrils from the pounding he was taking. But still he rode with all his old balance and skill.

Just as suddenly as he had begun to pitch, Hamad II satisfied his spleen and stopped. He'd got the grudge out of his system. He stood there, head up, ears forward, waiting for orders as he had once been taught.

Blacky reached out and patted the great neck. "Good boy," he gasped. "Let's go." He lifted the horse to a slashing lope and sped up Pine Slope.

The back and leg were not bothering Blacky at all. He was afraid to think of them. He urged Hamad II to greater speed, hoping to be able to cling to the saddle long enough to reach the picnickers and lead them to safety.

They made the top of Pine Slope and plunged down the hogback. When Hamad II leaped into the logging road and turned up the canyon, they were not far ahead of the racing fire.

With that fire behind him, the stallion needed no urging. He gained ground steadily. At every turn Blacky expected to meet the trucks. But they left the narrows behind and tore along where the canyon widened out.

Another quarter mile and he saw the trucks coming. There was not much smoke up there as yet, and, as he had figured, none of the crowd had any idea they had been cut off.

They were simply being sensible and getting out early.

Those on that picnic never forgot following Blacky and the great horse up a draw to a barren shale field that was not only a potent firebreak, but gave them a fine view of the inferno they had so narrowly escaped. The fire was confined to the canyon, but so would the picnickers have been, had not Blacky and Hamad II stopped them.

NADA was the first of the crowd to notice the horse Blacky was riding. "You shouldn't!" she cried. "It's not safe. Remember what Dad said!"

Blacky just smiled. Maybe he was going to pay for this in pain and misery, but he was happy. He had ridden a horse that everyone knew Norm Bross, winner of the Pendleton grand prize saddle, could not ride!

It was Neil Samuels who suggested they go to Blacky's orchard where there was a big spring and spread out the food they had brought. He'd be damned if he was coming all the way up here and go home half starved, fire or no fire.

At the home corral, Blacky stepped down from Hamad II. He expected to collapse and he clung to the saddle, but nothing happened. He unsaddled the stallion and turned him back into the corral.

As he started for the orchard, where food was being laid out, it suddenly hit Blacky that what Dr. Slocum had hopefully predicted had taken place. The right jolt had been given him. The first pitch of Hamad II had released the pinched nerve. He was as good as he had ever been. Even the hitch in his leg was gone.

Blacky laughed loud and long, all by himself. He was a trifle hysterical. Now he could get his buckers, and he could ride for the grand prize at Pendleton. He could win it, too. Strangely he was not as elated by the prospect as he should have been, and this sobered and puzzled him.

Slowly he rounded the house and saw that those in the orchard were waiting for him and paying little attention to Norm Bross. Suddenly he was sorry for Norm. Through no real fault of his own, Norm's day of triumph was ruined.

"Maybe I've grown up," he reflected and hit nearer the truth than he realized.

When the picnic broke up, Nada said to Norm, "I've stood all the jolting I can take in that truck. Blacky is going to take me home in his car, if it's all right with you."

"Suit yourself," gritted Norm and turned away.

After they were all gone, Blacky made no move to get his car.

"Nada," he said, "I've been plumb blind. I've been ahead all the way, and all on account of nearly getting killed."

There was the same starry look about her there had been that day down in Hardesty when he had mentioned being sore and jealous. He now knew the mistake he had made. There was no danger of his repeating it. Stretching out his arms he gathered her close.

"All Norm got was a saddle," he said. "Norm just thinks he's the grand prize winner!"

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 50)

1. Horse has larger hoof.

2. Because strong prevailing winds are from the south.

3. Bridle (or hackamore), saddle and saddle blanket.

4. Pine.

5. Texas.

6. Quartz.

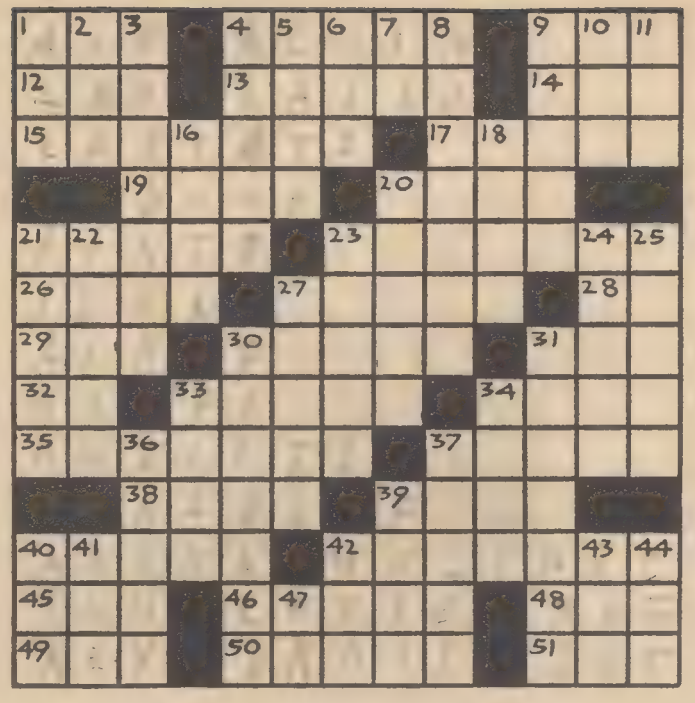
7. One grows on a cow, the other on a horse. Cow's tail is haired about same as on body except for brush of longer, coarser hair at the end. Horse's tail is all coarse hair brush of wholly different type from his body hair.

8. California.

9. A horse is said to be grassy when he is muscle-soft and possibly too fat from grazing on green grass without enough use to harden him up.

10. (1) Kissing B's. (2) Susie (Su Z) in a corner. (3) Forks of the road. Double Lazy Y. Railroad junction.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Venomous snake
4 Once more
9 Pair
12 Meadow
13 Cowboy's rope
14 Fishing pole
15 Lassos
17 Small hill
19 Cupola
20 Yarn fluff
21 Calico horse
23 Western cattle owner
26 Notion
27 Indian tent
28 Behold
29 To ventilate
30 Sheriff's men
31 To sum up
32 Negative reply
33 Indian of Utah
34 Algonquian Indian
35 Egg dishes
37 Mountain canary
38 Seizes
39 Transportation cost
40 Sports field
42 Bronco
45 Total
46 Unattached
48 Female sandpiper
49 Lock opener
50 Metallic refuse
51 Placed

DOWN

1 Total amount
2 Ocean
3 Cowboy's mate
4 Famous Texas mission
5 Fence opening
6 Donkey
7 Exists
8 Person named for office
9 Veracity
10 Was the victor
11 Strange
16 Small particle
18 One time
20 Passing, as of time
21 Keyboard instrument
22 Dialect
23 Reposes
24 Senior
25 Cattle roundup
27 Race track tipsters
30 Mottled, as horses
31 Unpaid amount
33 Scheme
34 Rudely concise
36 Foe
37 Foundations
39 Bother
40 To question
41 To regret
42 Cow's cry
43 Born
44 To obtain
47 Either

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

STORM-WISE

By Francis H. Ames

"SO," ARCH CONGER said slowly, "you want Snowball, Beth. Gentled. I'll get him for you."

"Maybe," Mark Talbert told him, "you will. And maybe you won't, Arch."

It isn't usual for two young men to propose to the same girl in each other's presence. But Arch and Lark had come to Beth Jeffry for a showdown. They had proposed to her before, separately, which was no secret to either, so it didn't matter.

Arch was a solid built puncher. He had dark, wavy hair and brown, expressive eyes. His too square chin and wide mouth were all that kept him from being handsome. He was in his early twenties, and Lark was no older. Lark was taller, slimmer hipped, a grey-eyed, high-cheek-boned man, with a lean and hungry look.

Beth was a girl built and fashioned to attract men. Her father, who owned the Cabin Creek mercantile, often remarked that since Beth had "grown up" and started clerking in the store he no longer had the opportunity of waiting on anyone who wore pants. Every puncher on the range constantly found himself in need of some item from Beth's dry goods counter.

Beth had the bluest eyes and the yellowest hair in Cabin Creek. She could dazzle a man with a smile, and then she could talk low and throaty, her eyes serious, seductively promising. There had been more than one battle between the young bucks of the Cabin Creek country over her in the

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HOW BLIND can love of a woman make a man? By the time Lark asked that question, he could see

past. But Arch Conger, son of Sam Conger, who owned the B and C, and Lark Talbert, son of Tom Talbert of the Forked Tongue, had narrowed the field down to themselves. Arch and Lark had fought other men over Beth, but not each other. Their friendship, begun during childhood and strengthened during young manhood, had stood the strain of their impetuous courtship.

"Perhaps," Beth said, tossing her head as she replaced the trousers the men had been looking at back on the shelves, "you two can bring Snowball in together. That way," she snapped, turning to look at them with eyes that were suddenly angry, "I can marry you both."

"You mean," Arch queried, "that you'll marry the man that brings Snowball in."

Beth smiled at Arch, and then she turned to look at Lark.

"I didn't say that, or did I?" she asked.

She didn't say it, Lark thought, but that is exactly what she means. An inner elation came to Lark. This was the long awaited showdown. This was a test that Beth was putting them to, so that she would be able to choose the better man for her husband. He gave her a slow, crooked look, and the corners of his mouth lifted in a faint smile.

"I'll be seeing you, Beth," he said and went out.

As Lark stepped from the store he looked back and saw Arch saying good-by to the girl. He went down the street to the town's hitch yard, selected his horse from those tied there, and rode into the fast-gathering darkness.

It was late December, and a soft, foglike mist hung over the land. As Lark rode out of town his mind chewed on the problem. There had never been any doubt in his mind, since Beth had blossomed into womanhood and he and Arch had sprouted beards, that the girl would eventually become the wife of one of them. The others had never mattered to Lark.

Always it had been Arch and himself. In childhood they had been the best swimmers, the winners in games, the best trappers and shots. They had become the best range hands. The Cabin Creek country had never been able to ascertain which was the best bronc peeler. Twice in the past two years, at the local Fourth of July rodeos, Arch and Lark had tied for top honors in the bucking contests. Two years back Arch had beaten Lark at roping, and Lark had taken the ribbon away from Arch in bulldogging. The next year the judges had reversed their defeats and wins. There were many who would have liked to see these two young hellions meet in man to man combat, but it was something that no man expected to see, for in work or sport or courtship they were friends.

Lark smiled as he lifted his grey gelding into a lope, thinking of Arch, and then the smile went away. Arch would try to bring Snowball in—gentled. This was a game that carried more than a purse of gold or a silver ornamented saddle as the prize.

LARK'S thoughts turned to Snowball. The big, pure white stallion wouldn't be hard to find. There wasn't a man in Cabin Creek who didn't know where Snowball ranged. The stud wouldn't be difficult to rope, for his defense didn't lay in speed, and he had felt the rope many times before. Snowball was a cunning killer, a horse that had never been broken, although attempts had been carried far beyond methods that were almost invariably successful with other horses. There were rumors that Snowball had been worked in harness in Wyoming, by a sodbuster who hadn't lived to boast about it long. Certainly, the white stud had killed one man and badly injured three others since Gaff Jenkins had bid him in among a wild bunch bought at a Miles City auction, five years back.

Snowball had been three years old then, wearing a Wyoming brand that had been vented at the sale. Gaff Jenkins had never put his own iron to the bronc's shoulder, because Snowball had killed him before he got a chance to do it. The stallion had crowded Jenkins into the corral poles, bitten his neck, shouldered him down, and driven the life from him with lashing forefeet. After that he'd jumped the corral

fence and disappeared into the badlands to the north.

A year later the boys had located the horse in the badlands around Mink Spring. They'd thought that it would be a good idea to bring the stallion in for the Fourth of July annual rodeo. A horse that had killed a man would be a certain attraction. When Perc Sinclair had crowded in on the stud, dropping his twine over his head, the stud hadn't hauled back as most horses would have done. He had charged instantly. Perc got off with only broken ribs, because several other ropers had rushed to his aid.

There was a devilish cunning in Snowball. As soon as he found himself well tied he became almost docile, watchful for that split second of timing that would permit him to kill. Later, in the rodeo corral, after the boys brought him in, he had suddenly pivoted and cracked a man's skull with his hoofs. Saddled in the squeeze gate he had ceased to struggle. But when Ace Boomer, top rider for the state, topped him off, he had thrown himself over backward and deliberately rolled on the rider. Then he'd come up, a wild-eyed, screaming demon, to pummel the downed man with striking hoofs. The stallion had broken away from the hazers that day, rearing to strike at man and beast alike when they attempted to close in. Boomer's saddle had been found, rubbed off beneath a cedar limb in the badlands. Boomer lived, but he'd spent six months in the Miles City hospital, and he'd never be in shape to ride again.

This was the horse that Lark and Arch were to bring in to Beth Jeffry. I'll gentle him, Lark thought grimly. He can be rode down if a man lives long enough. I'll ride him until his tongue hangs out. I'll beat Arch to it, for he'll never suspect that I'll ride tonight. He'll wait until morning, and morning will be too late.

The run from town had taken the hump out of Lark's grey gelding. He pulled the animal up to a jog trot designed to eat up the miles. The ground fog was clearing now, but a low cloud bank lay under the sky. Lark heard the pounding of fast running hoofs behind him, and he smiled. Why run Arch a race? They often rode together from town as far as the forks in the trail, and they could ride together tonight. Arch would go home to sleep, to get an early start in the morning. Lark would ride through the night.

The horse swept out of the darkness, and the rider hauled him up until he reached for the sky. Lark crowded close, words for Arch forming on his lips, and then he saw that the rider was a woman. He knew at once who she was. No other girl sat the saddle with quite the grace of Jean Percon; no other woman rode with a man's abandon.

"Lark," she called, "is that you?"

"It's me," Lark said. "Why the stampede?"

She turned to him, flinging her arms wide, inhaling deep lungfuls of the night air.

"Would a person ride at a walk on such a night as this?" she cried.

Lark was as weather wise as most range bred men. He had given no thought to what kind of night it was because of his preoccupation with the problem at hand. But now he looked at the brooding, overcast sky, sniffed the heavy air, felt the warmness of it. At this time of year it should not be warm. A storm hung in the offing, and the brown earth lay waiting for snow too long delayed. The jack rabbits were white in their daybeds, and the cattails had long since dropped their cotton covered seeds along the swales. A man rides tonight, Lark thought, at his peril.

THE air was charged with the threat, and it brought a wildness to Jean Percon's features. Lark looked at her, seeing her for the first time in the years that he had known her. A trapper's daughter, her French blood put dark mystery in her eyes, a delicate duskiness in her skin, a slight flaring in the nostrils above her full lips. She wasn't as pretty as Beth Jeffry, yet tonight there was something about her that reached out to Lark, touching a responsive chord of wildness that lay in him. The girl saw it and smiled. Then Lark settled back in his saddle, his eyes somber.

"What's so good about tonight?" he grumbled. "Storm in the offing, sure as shooting. You'd best ride like hell for home, Jean. You're got a good piece to ride."

"And you?" she queried. "You ride to the Forked Tongue and leave Arch Conger to court Beth Jeffry."

"I leave Arch," he snapped, "to do as he darn pleases."

She was silent, and they rode on together, their mounts' hooves loud on the frozen ground. It was full dark, yet they knew each step of this familiar ground. Their nostrils told them of the sage flats, their bodies felt the tightening of their horse's muscles as they came into the long pull to the top of the ridge overlooking Bonepile Valley and its bitter watered creek. On the ridge the girl lifted her bay into a run, pitching down into the blackness, and Lark found himself pounding beside her. She laughed as she lifted her horse with the reins, knowing, to the exact split second, when to leap over the narrow cut of the creek. At the forks of the road they pulled up, the horses restless, pawing with impatience. Jean pointed to the three forks.

"That way to Conger's," she said. "This way to the Forked Tongue. This way to Père Percon's cabin. How many times have you and I and Arch parted here? How many times will we do it again, Lark?"

There seemed a hidden meaning in her words, and it puzzled Lark, but he thought about Snowball and about Beth and brushed it from his mind.

"Many times, Jean," he said, lifting his hand in farewell.

He put the grey into a lope that it could well hold until they struck the rough going of the badlands. With good riding it would be near dawn when he struck the lush meadows of Mink Canyon, where Snowball was known to hole up in winter. A scouting stalk at dawn, a chase in which his grey would be the faster horse, the rope and then the saddle, the ride and then he'd come back to Beth. It was something that occupied his mind wholly now, a oneness of purpose that held no thought of defeat.

Lark hit the badlands about midnight. It was as dark as the inside of a Stetson, and snow was falling, great, slowly dropping feathery flakes that clung to Lark's leather jacket. He pulled on his oiled slicker, and when horse and man moved forward, the slicker rustled against buffalo berry and wild plum brush. The brush told the man where he was as surely as though it had been daylight. The choked draw rimmed the entrance to the never-never land of the badlands like a fur girdle about a woman's waist.

Lark spent the rest of the night feeling his way through a maze of draw and butte and canyon. This was the wildest, most forsaken land in the West. The snow was piling up now in a soft, silent blanket underfoot. In the first grey rays of dawn Lark came out on the ridge and looked down on the country below him through the whirling storm. In the compass of his mind he laid it out neatly. Straight down lay the wonderland along the Little Missouri River.

Here the ground flattened out, the buttes were lower, more eroded by time, more widely spaced, and lush meadows were interwoven between them. Prior to the snowfall the land had been parched with dryness. Only in one place, in the canyon below Mink Spring, would the grass be sweet and green. Here would be Snowball's feeding and watering ground. He would most certainly seek it in the storm. Range sense told Lark that the stallion would head far up toward the blind end of the canyon to seek shelter against its high ramparts.

Lark wiped the snow from his face, shook it from his broad shoulders, and then he sent the grey down, thankful for the half darkness. He had struck the mouth of Mink Canyon when he saw another rider emerge from the gloom. He cursed softly as he angled to meet him. Lark and Arch sat in their hulls and looked at each other.

"So," Lark said softly, "you rode all night, too."

"You thought you'd coyote around me,

didn't you, Lark?" Arch said. "I don't fool that easy."

A SOFT answer lay behind Lark's lips, and then he saw Arch's eyes, cold and hard and challenging. He had seen Arch look this way before, but never at him. It jolted him, brought him rudely down to earth. Here in this silent storm, with no other eyes to see the end of friendship, was to be the final showdown. Lark knew it with a certainty that tightened his belly and brought a coldness to his spine.

"Where de wo go from here, Arch?" he asked levelly.

"I'm riding up the canyon," Arch said. "I'm riding alone. You're turning back."

"This is something that we can't do together," Lark said, swinging down. "Unload, Arch, and we'll discuss it."

Arch came down and placed his back against his claybank. Then he launched himself at Lark, his mouth twisted into ugliness. Lark drove his fist between the reaching hands, knocking his man down, then stood back, poised in the knee-deep snow, waiting. Arch came up, lunged forward, his oaths beating against the buttes, and Lark knew that he had a man to whip.

They fought silently, the horses backing away from the fast moving tangle, snorting through their nostrils. It was a battle that moved raggedly over the snow, with first one man down and then the other, and no quarter asked or given. Then Lark lifted a punch from his knees. It caught the incoming Arch on the jaw, and laid him half stunned on his back.

Lark looked down at his friend a moment. Then he brought the claybank in, lifted the half conscious man into the saddle, and placed the reins in his hands.

"Go on home, Arch," he said, "and forget it. Next time you may get the upper hand."

Arch straightened in the saddle, lifted the ribbons as though to swivel his horse about, then suddenly lashed down with a clubbed quirt. The weighted butt struck Lark above the temple and he dropped in the snow like a felled tree.

Blood dribbled from the corners of Arch's mouth as he looked down at Lark, and his eyes were hard to read. He swiveled the claybank around and rode over to Lark's grey. He tied the reins around the horn, booted the grey lightly in the rear, and watched it gallop into the falling snow, headed for the Forked Tongue.

Arch rode up Mink Canyon, without looking back. A puff of wind came out of the northwest and the air turned cold with its first touch. By the time the claybank had drawn near the canyon's end the wind was blowing a gale, whirling the feathery snow aloft, hemming the rider in as though he were wrapped in a smothering blanket of down. Visibility was cut to a few feet, and Arch was almost upon Snowball before he saw him backed against the canyon's wall. The horse was facing him, it's muscles tightened for flight. Arch drove home with his hooks, catapulting the claybank at the white stud.

Snowball turned against the cliff that barred his flight, and then, true to his heritage of hate, he swiveled and charged. Arch's rope shot out and he drove his knee into the claybank's side, coming down hard with the neck rein, breaking the horse out of its inclination to set back against a rope that had settled true on its target.

There was no better rope horse in the country than Arch's. This game that Arch played was strange to the claybank, yet it answered every shift of its rider's body, every slightest touch of the ribbons. It moved with lightning rapidity, avoiding the screaming charge of the stallion and swinging around to bring the rope that was about its neck taut about its hocks. The captive spilled down in the snow, with its head swung around beneath one shoulder.

Arch sprang from the saddle with a pigging string in his hand to lash the stallion's deadly forefeet together before it could lunge up. The stud reared on its hind legs, striking at Arch with the battering ram of its tied fore legs, but the claybank backed away, keeping the rope taut, throwing the stallion over backward. Arch tossed another loop around the back legs, and the

wild horse lay helpless. He was still, refusing to waste strength on useless struggle, waiting for the moment that had always come before, when he could lash out to kill.

Arch secured his ties, blindfolded Snowball, and pulled the saddle from the claybank. With some difficulty he got it on the stud, forcing the cinch through the soft snow beneath its belly. He waved the claybank away, watching it move with the driving storm on its tail. Then he put a foot in the top stirrup, set nerve and muscle to readiness, freed pigging strings, yanked the blindfold. Beth seemed awfully near to the rugged cowboy now.

SNOWBALL lay still for a long moment and it seemed to Arch that he could see the careful scheming in the outlaw's eyes. The horse surged to its feet, and Arch slid his foot securely into the other stirrup, slipped quirt thong about his wrist, and set his hooks.

The great, white stallion screamed as he went up, and Lark Talbert, painfully following the fast disappearing tracks of Arch's progress through the snow, heard the scream. He broke into a staggering run, as fear for Arch reached out to tug at him. Lark came upon the scene just as Snowball threw himself over backward. He saw Arch lithely slide out of the saddle, tossing himself clear, saw him come up with the bronc, and then the stallion was bucking across the flat, his pitching interfered with by the soft snow, but with Arch riding high and pretty.

Lark's hand went to the gun at his hip, and Jean Percon's words flashed through his mind: "How many times will we three part at the forks of the trail again?" Lark's spread fingers jerked away from the gun as a grimace of horror came to his face. The motion had been impulsive, instinctive, yet it had been a move toward murder. To what lengths, Lark thought, can love of a woman drive a man?

Snowball bucked high and straight, bawling each time he hit the ground, and then he shoved his nose in the snow and deliberately rolled straight over on his rider. Horrified, Lark saw the white body poised in air, saw it crash down on the man, and then he was running toward the spot, sobbing in his throat. Momentum carried the stallion over twice, and then it came up, pivoting about, screaming as it struck at the figure in the snow. The stud ignored Lark in its desperation to reach its victim, and Lark caught reins and horn, and then he was in the saddle, clamping home the rowels, jerking the maddened beast back from Arch.

Snowball went up, and Lark reversed his quirt and brought the leaded butt down between the stud's ears. It was a cruel blow, delivered with all his strength. Lark was a man whose code had always been to treat horseflesh with firm kindness, but this animal was a killer, and Arch's life and his own were at stake. The quick thought came to Lark that he could have ended this affair in the twinkling of an eye with the .45 at his hip, and he knew with clarity that Beth Jeffry had stood between Snowball and a bullet. A man couldn't ride a dead horse in.

The stallion made three bucking jumps, three times he attempted to throw his body over backward, and each time Lark beat him down again with the quirt butt. He tried to throw himself over forward, and Lark wound the ribbons about the horn to hold him up. Spur and quirt and locked lines brought panic to the stallion, and suddenly he stretched out in a wild run down the canyon. Lark would not let him stop. He rode him unmercifully, feeling the weakening come at last, and then he turned him with quirt and rein until he went back the way he had come, facing the biting blizzard wind toward the spot where Arch lay.

The storm was howling now. The snow was packing under the bitter cold and the wind's force, forming a crust that momentarily held, then broke, its jagged edges cutting into the horse's flesh. Lark had a hard time locating Arch's body, sprawled in the snow and now half concealed. Seeing him lying there brought soul shriveling panic to Lark, but he fought it down, forced

himself to remain cool. Snowball stood beside Arch now, trembling with fatigue, his head hanging low. Lark sat in the saddle, knowing what he had to do, wondering how he would do it. To unload from Snowball would be disastrous, for they would lose their last means of transportation, yet to stay on him meant merely standing by and watching a man die. As his brain gnawed at the problem he heard the whining of fast driven wood on snow, saw the figure shoot down the steep incline on skiis.

JEAN PERCON made a half circle about Snowball and came to a halt, looking up at Lark. Her eyes met his solidly and then they went to Snowball and the figure on the ground.

"You need help, Lark," she said, and then she was kneeling beside Arch, turning him over, while the snow powdered her dark hair that escaped from the wool cap she wore.

"I don't dare get down," Lark said woodenly. "This is the only horse we've got. How badly is Arch hurt?"

"He's been kicked in the head," she said, "but he's alive. We'll have to get him out of here fast or he'll freeze."

"If you can get him up behind me," he began, and then he knew it wouldn't work. Snowball was temporarily done in, but he'd try again to kill as soon as he got his wind.

"I don't know," she said, and her forehead wrinkled with deep concentration. "We have no wood—our cabin's six miles over the ridge."

"The skiis," he cried, sudden urgency riding him. "Lash them together with pigging strings like a sled. Lay Arch on them and I'll tow you with a rope."

It was a slender hope, a slender thread of hope, yet they grasped it eagerly. Jean bound the skiis together, and it was her strength alone that dragged his body on them. She crouched on the ends, behind him, holding Lark's rope. Lark held the threatening quirt butt out for Snowball to see, and the stallion rolled his eyes at it, remembering it. He twisted and threatened to pitch, and Lark clubbed him. He moved off in the direction that Lark wanted to go. This wasn't his moment and he knew it. Other horses with his temper would have fought until they died, but Snowball was too cunning for that.

Six miles through such going was something to try the strength of a ride-toughened, oat-fed horse. It was weary and muscle-deadening to Snowball, but he made it. He stood with trembling legs wide apart in Père Percon's open-ended barn, while Lark tied him securely with a rope noose around his neck.

Père burst out of the cabin, a powerful, wide-shouldered bear of a man, with dark eyes like his daughter's.

"*Sacré,*" he cried, picking Arch up as if he were a child and heading for the cabin. "this man is hurt. Quick, Jean, brandy and hot water!"

Inside they did what they could. They wrapped Arch in blankets, poured brandy down his throat, bathed his bruised head with hot water. They stood anxiously about his bed until his eyes opened. For a moment he was bewildered, and then as he remembered, his eyes gleamed wildly, and he tried to sit up.

"Lark!" he yelled. "Lark's out there in the snow—I turned his bronc loose!"

Lark pressed him down against the pillow with gentle hands.

"Forget it, Arch," he said. "We're both safe in Père Percon's cabin."

Arch looked at Lark and the wildness went from his eyes. He smiled.

"Good old Lark," he said, and in another moment had fallen into a heavy sleep.

Lark and Père sat and smoked while Jean prepared food. There was an eagerness for talk in the old man's eyes, but his daughter's glance held him silent. She told him what had happened and she told it in one sentence.

"Lark and Arch rode out to get Snowball, Arch got kicked in the head and I happened by and we brought him in."

She happened by, Lark thought, skiing six miles at dawn in a raging blizzard. She is a strange woman. Why haven't I noticed before how beautiful she is?

They ate and talked of the coming winter and of the chances for a good fur harvest, of how stock would fare. Then Lark helped Jean with the dishes, and when they were done Lark put on his coat.

"I'd best be going now," he said. "Arch will be all right now."

PÈRE PERCON looked at him with puzzled eyes. "In this blizzard? We have sleeping room in the attic. You will stay with us, my friend, until the storm blows out."

"You can take my horse," Jean said quickly, not looking at him. "He is fresh, he will take you to Cabin Creek."

She knew that it was to Cabin Creek and to Beth that he would ride on her horse, yet she offered it.

"Thanks," he told her. "But I'll ride Snowball. He'll be rested now."

Père came out of his chair with a smothered oath, looked at his daughter and slowly subsided.

"Such a man," he muttered, "is surely a fool."

"Snowball," Jean said slowly, "won't be rested enough to carry you that far through the snow. He won't be rested enough to kill you, Lark."

"I don't want him rested that much," Lark said, and his voice was harsh and brittle. "I want to ride him until he knows that he is beaten, until he never forgets it."

"Until," she finished for him, "you can truthfully say to Beth Jeffry that he is gentled."

"Until he's gentled," he agreed as he went outside.

Jean followed him to the barn, and he waited there for her. As she stepped into the half darkness he pinned her to the wall with his hands rough on her shoulders. She looked up at him with calm eyes.

"How did you happen to be there?" he demanded fiercely.

Her eyes filled with scorn for him.

"I didn't intend to hear what was said in the store," she told him, "but sometimes a person can't help overhearing. I heard what Beth told you and Arch. Men are such fools." Her voice was tinged with bitterness.

He tightened his grip on her shoulders.

"You knew we'd ride at night and you knew we might need help, so you followed on skiis, knowing the crust would form with the changing of the wind."

"I knew, of course," she said.

She knew, of course. She was the daughter of a trapper, and there was wild blood in her, a product of the same wild land that had spawned Lark. Yet he had forgotten to be storm-wise while she had remembered.

How blind, Lark asked himself, can love of a woman make a man.

He released her shoulders and he said, "Stand clear. This ugly brute ain't dead yet."

She watched him untie the stallion cautiously and take a turn about a post outside the barn. She watched him haul the stud out, snubbing his stubborn head close to the wood, saw the rolling of the alert, cunning eyes. He got into the saddle with his quirt reversed in his hand and then he cut the rope with one slash of his knife. Snowball screamed as he went up, but he came down before the quirt had time to fall. Pitching straight across the yard, he bolted into the storm.

THEY came down the main drag of Cabin Creek as the wind died and the sky cleared. Twin sundogs flanked the blood red setting sun. The cold was intense, biting at a man's vitals. Lark tied the beaten stallion before the store and went in, to look at Beth. Hoar frost hung from his lashes.

The girl gave a scream of delight as she saw the great, white stallion standing at the rail, his head hanging with weariness. She came to Lark, her eyes promising him everything in the world.

"I knew you'd win, Lark," she cried. "I hoped it would be you."

"A hell of a way," he said shortly, "to pick a husband. Snowball's yours—you'll find him in the livery when you want him."

He turned his back on her and led the white stud down the street to the livery.

"Oats and hay and a warm stall," he said to the astonished livery man. "I don't think he'll give you any trouble, but watch him. I want the best snow traveling horse you've got, I'm riding out fast."

Lark rode again that night, but this time he traveled faster, on hard, crusted, moonlit snow. He arrived at the Percon cabin after midnight and stabled his horse. The cabin was dark, but as he finished feeding the livery horse he saw Jean come across the yard, her slimness outlined against the moon. She stepped into the darkness of the barn.

"Lark," she called. "I waited up for you."

"How did you know I'd be back?" he asked softly.

She leaned back against the barn and her voice was suddenly small and uncertain.

"I didn't know," she said. "I wasn't sure—I hoped—"

He swung her about until the moonlight lay on her face, looking at her hungrily. Some women, he thought, use their beauty for good, and others use it for evil. Some women are capable of choosing their man with certainty, others look over the field, not having the depth to be sure.

The man that gets this one can be thankful to his dying day. Why didn't I know this before?

"I'm glad," she said, "that you and Arch are still friends. That is what I meant when I asked you if we'd ride to the forks together again. I was afraid—"

Her nearness stirred him in a way that he had never been stirred before, and his need for her tugged at his arms.

"There's too many forks to the trail, Jean," he said. "For us there should only be two—one for Arch and one for you and me to the Forked Tongue."

She gave way to the pull of his arms and came into them with a glad cry. He found himself wondering if Arch would still be a fool when he awakened.

He thought that probably Arch had been cured, too.

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OUT OF THE CHUTES

THE CUTTING HORSE has never lacked boosters. From the old trail-driving days right up until now you couldn't spend an evening in a bunkhouse without hearing boasting about some cutting horse.

All the other range chores came into the arena, but until very recently nobody thought the public would be interested in watching the workaday task of cutting steers from a herd. "There's no blood and thunder to cutting," the producers said. "Rodeo fans want danger and thrills, but cutting is a highly trained performance from a horse. Dudes wouldn't appreciate it."

It has been five years since the National Cutting Horse Ass'n was formed, and already dozens of shows have added cutting horse events—Pendleton, San Francisco, Phoenix, Reno, to name only a few. Producers who doubted the drawing power of the cutting horse need only listen to the silence in the grandstand and watch the fascinated faces of the spectators to know they were wrong.

In *Ranch Romances,* we told you about the growing popularity of the event long ago, but now we'll really get on the band wagon and predict that in a couple more years a cutting event will be just as much a part of every show as bronc-riding.

Cutting is the first new event to come along in years, and much of the credit for getting it into the show goes to the National Cutting Horse Ass'n.

"It all started," says Ray Smyth, "at the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show at Ft. Worth in 1946. As I remember, there were 13 enthusiastic cutting horse people gathered up in a tent to discuss the possibility of forming some kind of association. There were two girls in the bunch, Margaret Montgomery and Fern Sawyer. We did not have enough bales of hay for everyone to sit on, so some sat on saddles or on a spread-out blanket. When this meeting broke up we had formed what we thought would be more or less a local cutting horse association. Someone remarked we might even get as many as fifty members by another year."

They decided, however, to aim high and put the word "National" in front of their handle. And when that year was up, they had put on the first official National Cutting Horse Ass'n show in Dublin, Tex., (with stock and arena furnished by Everett Colborn), and they had members in 12 states.

"This doesn't mean," says Ray, "that everything was smooth sailing. About everything happened to us that could happen. But it was a good bunch of fellows to work with. When something went wrong, they'd come right in to me and say, 'Well, you made a bust. This is the way it should have been done.' Then they would all pitch in and help straighten things up again."

ONE OF the first and most important things the group accomplished was to make a set of cutting horse contest rules. Emphasis, of course, is placed on the ability of the horse, not the rider. All artificial gadgets are eliminated, and the rider must not rein his horse or spur or kick him to turn him. Points are added to the score, as in other rodeo events, if the steer is hard to handle, and points are subtracted whenever the horse gets help from the rider.

The attempt is made to simulate range conditions as much as possible and still to show off all the horse's ability in a two-minute period. The steers are held in the arena by other riders, while the contestant cuts out a designated animal and then pre-

it from returning to the hold for the two minutes. Contributing to the excitement of the show is a hazer who keeps the steer moving, making things as tough for the horse as possible. Of course, on a ranch the idea is to get the steer into the cuts as quickly and easily as possible, and the rodeo hazer would be definitely unwelcome. In fact, anyone who makes a noise around the herd at cutting time is likely to get cussed out.

Unlike the show horse, the ranch cutter wasn't especially trained for the job. As Tom Saunders explains in an article comparing the two in *Back in the Saddle*: "The old-time cutting horse learned the hard way—on his own and from experience. For years of hard use he was just another horse in the remuda until by some manner of action he revealed his natural cow sense. The wagon boss or foreman or owner of the outfit took him over from there and elevated him to the respected position of 'Cuttin' Hoss.'

"Vivid memories come back to me of seeing a faithful, tired, stove-up-acting little hog-backed, Roman-nosed horse, ducking and dodging his heart out to throw toward the cuts steer after steer."

That description wouldn't fit the show

cutting horse today. Many of them, like Jesse James who was designated Grand Champion at Ft. Worth last year, are carefully bred, registered Quarter Horses. Some of them, on the other hand, aren't much to look at. Satan, another top cutter, has a long face and a mournful expression, and he has been described as a candidate for sixth place in a conformation class with only five entries. Jeff Beals, his owner, once tried to sell Satan for $50 and got no takers. Right now, $50 wouldn't buy very much of his tail.

IF YOU'VE never seen a cutting horse event and you wonder what they're like, watch Satan's performance as seen by Thos. W. Allen in *Quarter Horse News*:

"Sometimes he looks like he is about to fall down, but that old head sticking on that fabulous neck is right square in front of that cow at all times, and the body is dangling along behind somewhere. When he's got to dig in and run, he has what it takes, and when he turns on his hind legs the tip of his nose can move halfway across the arena on one turn. He does not crowd the critter, and that is the secret of his success—he works best when he can get the cow out a considerable distance from the herd and leave about 15 feet of space between cow and horse. I claim he turns faster to the right because that is the side Jeff carries his tobacco chaw, and the added weight is no small item."

Even though no reining, kicking or spurring is allowed, that doesn't mean that the cowboy just goes along for the ride in a cutting horse event. There is complete coordination between the two. The man and the horse must know each other well and trust each other completely to make a prize-winning combination.

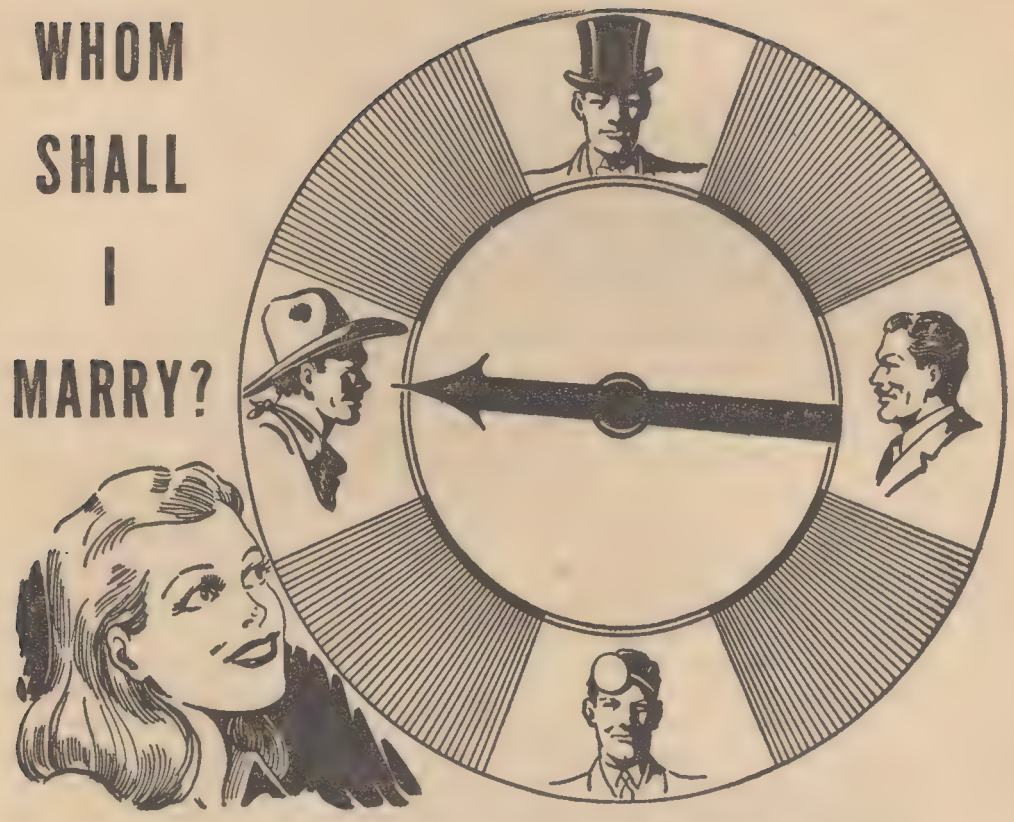
There are some cutting horses, though, which perform remarkably without any rider aboard. One of them is Jodie Earl. Jodie was the hit of the show at the Pikes Peak or Bust Rodeo at Colorado Springs last summer. This was the first major rodeo to present a cutting horse solo, and Jodie Earl has been in great demand ever since.

The cutting horse has changed a lot since the day when his only honor was his title; and though the arena isn't the same as the Texas range, cutting is basically the same. Steers act just the same as they did a hundred years ago, trying to get back to the herd, and horses must handle them just as they always have. Cutting horse events are the best chance most folks will ever get to see what work on the ranch is really like.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



By Professor Marcus Mari

The Aquarius Girl ***Jan. 21 to Feb. 19***

AQUARIAN girls are both gentle and generous at heart and have many beaux and many friends. They like meeting new people and welcome new ideas. There is nothing stodgy or stiff about them, and they will risk Mrs. Grundy's tongue to embark on new trails. Once they fall in love or marry, nothing will change their minds, however. Indeed, they are apt to meet their life partners more than halfway. Marriage to the Aquarian girl is a comradeship in which she often gives more than she takes, but she should marry a man who is willing to keep her on a very long lasso.

She's only human and has her faults, but they are usually excesses of her virtues. She's inclined to be sudden and opinionated, impatient and stubborn.

If she seeks a career it should be one in which she has a lot of latitude. Her mental energies, and her physical ones too, are greater than average, and she needs room for expression. She likes people and people like her. She is interested in everything except the past, and is that rare woman who does not attempt to cling to an old romance. There is always something fresh and new ahead for the Aquarian girl because she makes herself new interests daily.

Aquarians often find success in the theatre. Tallulah Bankhead, Judith Anderson and Jessica Dragonette are among them.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Marcus Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose 3 cents instead of stamp.)

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Wire in the Wind

By L. P. Holmes

THE STORY SO FAR:

Finding the days of the Pony Express running out, CLAY ROSWELL takes the job of wagon boss for JACK CASEMENT, who is stringing the first telegraph wire across the desert. Casement hires him against the wishes of his supply boss, REED OWEN, whose candidate for the job is MITCH BREEN. Clay has already had a run-in with Mitch and his brother SLADE. KATHERINE CASEMENT tends Clay's hurts after the ruckus, and Clay is disappointed that she and Owen are friends.

The day before the jumpoff into the desert Clay finds one of the wagons being overloaded on Owen's orders. He faces down Owen and has the load reduced to proper size, but the next morning the wagon is missing and its teamster found clubbed to death.

Clay follows sign to the Bear Wallow trading post, where he finds Company flour being sold. The Breens drive in with a wagon of stolen supplies. Clay kills Mitch, takes Slade prisoner and learns from him that Reed Owen is behind the steal.

Casement confronts Owen with his treachery, and Owen wounds him. Learning that her father is hurt, Katherine and Clay head for Ft. Churchill, where he now is. On the way they are ambushed by Goshiute Indians.

CONCLUSION

CLAY scrambled through the rocks toward the girl. "Kitts!" he yelled. "Kitts!"

Just before he reached her, Kitts shot

again, up the ridge. Clay dropped in beside her, glimpsed movement out there, more definite than any he'd seen before, and flung a final shot. Then once more came a silence that had suppressed thunder in it.

He put an arm around the girl's shoulders.

"You're all right?"

"All right. Right after your first shot they started coming down the ridge again. I—I shot at them. There was one so close I heard the bullet hit!"

He felt her shoulders shake in sobbing relief. He pulled her close and held her so until she quieted. And the world looked strange in his eyes, for now all about him things were taking on distinctness, and distance began to grow. Abruptly he understood.

Here was the dawn.

Somewhere up above and thinned with distance came a sound as much animal as it was human. A single fading howl, thwarted, almost mournful. Clay understood it. The Goshiutes had had enough. The survivors were leaving the field of battle. Dawn and the white man's guns were too much for them.

In the east the sky was silver and old rose, flushing more strongly with every passing moment. Clay stood up, lifting the girl with him.

"We can go now."

There were squat and shaggy things lying silent on the ridge sweep above the point, and as they passed them, the girl pressed close to Clay's side. But presently, swinging down and under the point to pick up another ridge top which wound toward the desert below, they were clear of all sign of what had made their grisly nightmare.

The sun came up and flashed its quick warmth on them. And down below, winding into view from a defile's shadowed depth, came a troop of cavalry. Clay fired a shot in the air, and the lashing echoes brought discovery. The file of troopers came surging up toward them. Clay turned and met the girl's weary, haunted eyes.

"It's a new day, Kitts," he said.

THE CAVALRY troop threw a short camp, while coffee was cooked and iron rations served. Clay Roswell told his story to a grizzled, hawk-faced officer, who ordered two of his men to turn their horses over to Clay and Katherine Casement and double up with companions. Riding double, these two were to escort Clay and Katherine back to Churchill, while he and the rest of the troop would ride high and pick up the trail of the fleeing Goshiutes. At the moment of parting, the officer shook Clay's hand and gave Katherine his best military bow.

"Men in uniform have been decorated for less than what you two went through," he said. "My respects!"

It was the same old desert, now that the sun was up—heat and dust and far distance. With letdown, the weariness of that long night settled Clay deep in his saddle, and he marveled anew at the endurance and courage of this slim, ruddy-haired girl riding beside him. He respected her silence, for he knew that her thoughts were once more reaching out to her father. When the dusty bedlam that was Ft. Churchill once more lifted before them, he led the way directly to the Casement cabin.

He lifted the girl down, steadied her a moment, for she was stiff and cramped and uncertain. Now she met his glance fully, with a strange and moving depth to her eyes. She murmured just two words, commonplace enough in themselves, but now carrying an accolade that drove all weariness from him and filled him with a swift and building warmth.

"Thank you!"

Zack Hubbard, the warehouse hand, stepped from the cabin door. He stared in some amazement, then exclaimed, "You arrived at just the right time, Miss Kate. Your father is conscious and asking for you."

She ran inside.

Clay turned the horses over to the troopers and thanked them. Then, he asked Zack Hubbard, "Casement? He's making the grade?"

Hubbard nodded. "With any kind of even break he'll be out of the woods in

another week. Best medicine in the world just went in to him. Say, by the looks of you, Miss Kate and you have been through something."

"It was quite a night," agreed Clay. "Now, what's the story of the shooting?"

Hubbard told him what he knew, which wasn't too much. He'd been at work in the warehouse, knowing that Jack Casement and Reed Owen were in the office, having an argument of some kind. He'd heard two shots, and when he'd got into the office Reed Owen was gone and Jack Casement was down.

"Any idea where Owen went?"

Hubbard shook his head. "Not a damn one. When the word got around, a bunch of teamsters went on the hunt for Owen. They combed the town from top to bottom but couldn't turn up hide nor hair of him. No tellin' where he is now. One thing is certain. Any of the boys lay a hand on him, they'll string him higher than they did that Breen hombre."

Clay went over to a bunkhouse, stretched out and sought sleep. For a long time it wouldn't come. In the darkness behind closed lids it seemed he could see again those shadowy, drifting figures of the past night, and in his ears still rang that outlandish chittering sound that suggested something inhuman. The wonder that he and Katherine Casement had won through unharmed was hard to clothe with reality. Time would color the whole thing with vague doubt that it had really happened.

WHEN sleep did take over, it was deep and long.

The singing of the bugles, carrying clear from the military post, woke him at day's end. By the time he had cleaned up and eaten, twilight had turned to dusk and dusk to dark. Katherine Casement answered his soft knock at the cabin door. She too looked rested, and all her crisp charm was back.

"Just wanted to get the latest on your father, Kitts," he said.

Her eyes were luminous with content. "He's going to get well, Clay. He really is. He's sleeping now."

"That," said Clay, "will be good news to carry back to the boys on the job."

"Then you're going right back?"

"Yes."

She gave a little sigh of relief. "I'm glad. I was afraid—"

"Afraid of what, Kitts? After last night you need never be afraid of anything again."

"I was afraid," she said slowly, "that you might have some idea of hunting down Reed Owen."

"He'll keep," Clay told her briefly. "Everything in good time. Keeping the job moving is far more important, now. But some day, maybe. . . ."

She shook her head. "No, Clay, not even some day. I want you to forget Reed Owen. He doesn't matter any more. With him will always ride his own punishment. But if you were to hunt him down, and there was shooting, as there would surely be—I wouldn't want that. Don't you understand?"

Clay didn't, not clearly. He said, a little inanely, "The job's the thing. I'll be getting along now."

He moved a little wearily as he went away into the night. How could you figure a woman and the way her mind worked? Where a man would be thirsting for revenge against Reed Owen, Katherine Casement wanted this thing dropped and forgotten. Why should she feel this way about a treacherous renegade? Maybe because women hung on to old dreams and insisted on sugaring them up, no matter how bitter the taste. Maybe because when a woman had once known softness in her heart for a man, she could never entirely shut him out of her memory, no matter how greatly he may have betrayed her confidence. Hell! There were a million maybes, and none of them supplied a satisfactory answer.

Clay Roswell rode a supply wagon that pulled out of Churchill the following dawn. His mood brightened as the slow grind of the heavy wheels put the miles behind. Work lay out ahead, and a man could lose himself in work. Work, mused Clay, was the greatest benefit conferred on man-

kind. It gave point and purpose to existence. Without it a man would never know balance and the relief from life's urgings. The things a man won from life by the measure of his own toil and at the price of his own sweat were the value of his own worth in his eyes and the eyes of all others who understood these things. Work built things, and in the building a man built himself. . . .

Where the Goshiute attack had first struck, the buckboard had been taken away. But the dead horses lay by the side of the road. The coyotes and buzzards had been at work, and the stench of carrion offended the air.

NIGHT in the high hills, a campfire's ruddy gleaming, tired mules munching at the feed racks on the sides of the wagon. Deep dark and the stars marching, then dawn's fresh breath and wheels rolling once more.

The relay station at Cedar Springs Pass had a message that had come in over the wire for Clay. It was brief, but carried a deeper meaning than it seemed:

> Well done! I'm with you in thought.
> Jack Casement

To Bill Yerkes, Clay gave the story and read Jack Casement's message. This last Bill spread among the various crews, and they went at their tasks with renewed vigor. The Old Man would be in on the finish.

"Boy," growled Bill Yerkes, "you sure scared hell out of all of us. When Pete Ryder, hauling in from Churchill, found that buckboard and dead team full of Goshiute arrows, and brought the word along, I had all I could do to keep the whole gang from dropping the job and going on a grand Injun hunt. I told them not to go jumpin' the traces, that you'd cut your eye-teeth at that sort of thing and you'd turn up bright and sassy. I was tellin' them things I wasn't any too sure of myself. But I was hopin'—and worryin', plenty! Musta been tough on that girl."

"It was a rough night," nodded Clay. "And we were lucky. Kitts—well, she's Jack Casement's daughter. Which is a pretty good answer, Bill."

They went up the hostile mountains and across them and down the other side. They built another relay station and moved on out into high sage desert. They ferreted out new timber stands where pole-cutting crews labored. They hauled supplies, and they strung wire, and they took the worst the wilderness could offer and beat it down and marched on over it. Time marched, too—days and weeks and finally months of it.

Ft. Churchill was days away by wagon but only seconds now by the magic of swooping wire and clicking instuments. The military had combed the far country, and after a couple of brushes with the Goshiutes and White Knives, had put the fear of God in them. The long road miles became increasingly safe.

And then one day a message came over the wires from Jack Casement to Clay Roswell. It said:

> Bring the headquarters wagon back to Churchill. I'm ready to go.

Clay showed the message to Bill Yerkes. "Pick a good sound man for the chore, Bill."

"Maybe you better read it again," said Bill Yerkes. "It doesn't say send, it says bring. And the message is to you, Clay. I figger it means what it says. Your chore, boy."

Clay left the next morning, driving the big spring wagon behind a team of four. A man, he thought, had to make this drive to get full realization of how far the job had progressed. Churchill was mightily distant to a man who had to drive a wagon there.

IN THE middle of a wickedly hot and dusty September day, Clay Roswell rolled the headquarters wagon up to the freight corrals at Ft. Churchill, turned the team over to the care of a hostler and went over to the Casement cabin. At his knock it was Jack Casement's voice that hailed him.

Casement was thinner than Clay had ever seen him, but his eyes were clear and his step steady as he came across the room to wring Clay's hand.

"Boy," he exclaimed, "you look good to me! Don't know what the job would ever have done without you. Luckiest day of my life was when you walked into it."

"That works both ways, Mr. Casement," said Clay. "Sure is good to see you up and around and your old self."

"How's the job coming?"

Clay had brought a surveyor's map with him, and he spread this out on the table and pointed to a pencil check on it. "Right there is where the outmost pole stood when I left. Tom Hughes and I kept up the records and reports as well as we could, but you got a chore of paper work ahead of you. All the men are anxious to see you back on the job."

"And am I pawing the ground to get there!" said Casement, studying the map. He made a swift computation of time and distance. "Hell, lad, you're a good eight miles ahead of scheduled progress. Maybe I better stay right here and let you keep on running the job."

"That's the men's present to you, Mr. Casement. Ever since the word came through about you being laid up, the gangs have gone at their work just a litle harder."

JACK CASEMENT'S face went grim and his eyes flashed. "All faithful but one. So many times I've thought—and I've had plenty of time at that—how unfair Kitts and I were to you the day you brought us the truth about Reed Owen. And I've silently apologized a thousand times. Now I do again."

"No need," said Clay. "That's over and long forgotten. In your place I'd have felt the same. No further word of Owen, I suppose?"

"No. He's dropped completely from sight. But I haven't forgotten—and I never will." Casement's square jaw jutted. "I'm not a revengeful man, lad, and I can forgive a lot of things. But never what

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Reed Owen added up to. He was selling the Company out, he was selling me out, he was selling out every decent, loyal man on the job. He was not only a thief and a traitor, he was a damned cold-blooded murderer—fully as responsible for the deaths of Brad Lincoln and Danny Huggins as were the Breens. Some day I'm hoping to come up with that fellow again. And when I do!" Casement spread the fingers of his right hand, then closed them slowly into a locked, clenched fist.

He stared harshly at nothing for a moment, then went on. "I've had a couple of men on the lookout for him. They've kept a watch out at Myers Wells, at Sugar Pine and Bear Wallow. I figured that he might, in time, show up at one of those trading posts, since he owned them. But so far we've drawn no luck. But we'll keep on watching and waiting."

"He's probably chucked the whole business and cleared out," Clay said. "My guess is he's crossed the Sierras again into California. He'll be remembering what happened to Slade Breen. He knows the teamsters who did that job would like nothing better than a chance to give him the same treatment. I'll be surprised if any of us ever see Reed Owen again. How's Katherine?"

The grimness left Casement's face. "Same old Kitts. Don't know what I'd do without her. She's over at the warehouse office now, keeping the books in shape. She's told me all about that night the two of you spent dodging Goshiutes. Something else I have to thank you for. You've a knack for putting the Casement family in your debt, Clay."

"Never meant it that way," said Clay gruffly. "Things just sort of happened. After that, I don't suppose Katherine wants any part of the out country again."

"To the contrary! She's just as anxious to get back as I am. Be all right with you if we pull out tomorrow morning?"

"With you two heading out, I can't think of a thing to keep me here in Churchill," declared Clay. "Got a few items of stuff

to pick up for some of the men. After that I'm ready to go any time."

There was a brisk step at the door, and Katherine Casement came in. "Any word, Dad, from Clay? Oh, he's here!"

A swift gust of color touched her cheeks, and she hesitated just slightly before holding out a slim hand. "It's good to see you, Clay." She smiled and added, "Dad's been driving me crazy, grumping around because he wasn't out on the big job again."

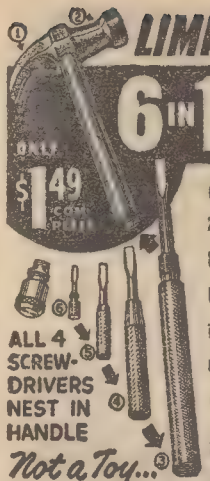
"Humph!" grunted Casement. "How about yourself, young lady? You've been skittering around like a restless bug, too. We leave in the morning. Now how's for a bite of lunch?"

The girl's deftness in the kitchen soon had them sitting at the table. Clay thought back to the first time he'd sat at this same table, and he mused at all the water that had flowed under the bridge since that time. Life could certainly throw its own unpredictable pattern at a man.

That night, right over there, Reed Owen had sat. But if Katherine Casement had any feeling that a ghost was at the table with them, she showed no sign of it. Despite the trapped heat in the cabin, she was full of bright energy and cheerfulness, and threw a barrage of questions at Clay concerning the big job.

WHILE the girl went back to the warehouse office to clean up affairs there, Clay spent the better part of the afternoon talking over the job with Jack Casement. Ahead lay the final drive. Word had come in from Salt Lake, by way of the Pony Express, so Casement said, that the west-running leg of the telegraph line was already far out in the salt flats.

"The original plans," Casement said, "called for a tie-in just south of the Pony Express station at Deep Creek, east of Antelope Valley. The way things are working out, that looks just about right, give or take a few miles. An all-over time of about four months for the actual job. Five hundred and seventy miles in all, when the tie-in is effected. Future history



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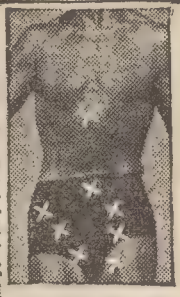

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will make a note of that, Clay."

"That's what Alex Majors of the Pony Express told me when he advised me to try for a job with you," nodded Clay. Then he grinned. "Funny, but I don't feel that I'm helping in any way to make history. All I feel is a sense of satisfaction when I see another pole planted and another sweep of wire shining in the sun."

"Man," said Casement, "is a queer sort of brute. By and large he's a long way from perfect, and there are certain specimens among him that are of a pretty low order. But at times he shows a streak of nobility. Tell that to some horny-handed, sweating bully boy with a crowbar in his paws, fighting hard rock and cussing every inch of it while he digs another hole to set up another pole, and he'd think you were crazy. But it's there, just the same. When man wants to really set his shoulder to a tough job, he rates up in the end as quite a guy."

"I'll feel a lot more noble after I've found a barber and got out of some of this shagginess," grinned Clay. "Me for town."

He found the barber and, shaven and shorn, emerged on a street where the long shadows were running and the dusty air seemed to quiver with the high, thin singing of the bugles from the military post. He recalled the items he was supposed to pick up for several of the men out at wire's end, and he headed for the supply house.

He was within a few yards of the door of the place when, from a shadow-darkened gap between two buildings, a voice said:

"I've been waiting for this, Roswell!"

There were many things in that voice besides the ominous words spoken. There was hate, thirst for vengeance and frustration's corrosive acid. There was whiskey and brooding and raw deadliness. But it was still the voice of Reed Owen!

A ROTUND, red-faced citizen of the town, carrying a pretty stiff cargo of whiskey, came weaving by and never knew the break this fact gave to Clay Roswell. But his position at that exact moment gave Clay a chance to come fully

around and face the angle of threat under the cover of the drunk's wobbly course. And when the drunk had gone on, Clay was set and tautly alert for whatever danger was reaching from the shadows.

He had the tall bulk of Reed Owen focused solidly with every sense. He could make nothing of the man's face in that fading light, but that didn't matter. The rest was clear enough.

Strange currents ran through Clay, his mind going blank in some ways and needle sharp in others. It was as though the mechanics of a man's brain, in the face of stark danger, automatically shed every diverting thought and poured everything into that fine and probing concentration he now felt. He spoke, hardly realizing it.

"Come out in the open, Owen. For once in your life, let's have a full look at you!"

"Good enough for me here!" And as Reed Owen spoke, his hand was in flashing movement.

Clay Roswell matched the move, leaning into a slight crouch. The Dragoon Colt whipped the echoes back and forth, its licking flame ruddy in the shadows. There was answering flame and concussion, but where Reed Owen's lead flew, Clay had no idea, nor cared. He only knew that the big gun in his fist was rocking and bucking in recoil again and again, and he knew with quiet, cold certainty that he wasn't missing.

The voice of the guns swallowed everything. Not even the wild yell of the startled drunk got far against the rocketing echoes of the guns.

And now, finally, Reed Owen did come into the open. He came in a few stumbling, dragging steps, his knees bending more and more with each stride. They gave way completely and let him down on his face. . . .

Gun silent and empty in his hand, Clay Roswell stood motionless for a long moment. This thing had come and gone so swiftly! But it was over and done with. Somewhere in the book of the destiny of men a period had been placed and the page turned. It had been written from the first, and it had come to pass.

Clay's mind began to unlock. Outside

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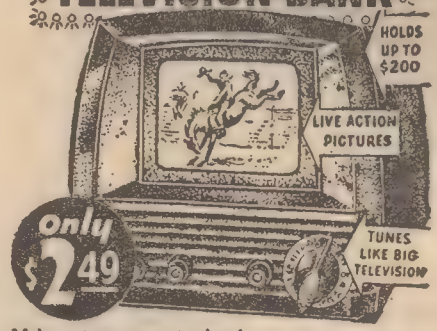

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sound and action began to move in and record themselves. The drunk was still yelling. The rumble of the guns had set him to running, and his overload of whiskey had tripped him up. He was still floundering, trying to get to his feet.

The street was aboil. Men called back and forth, came crowding in. Not that gunplay was a foreign thing in this wild outpost, but it was something to find out about and talk over. It was a dash of spice to flavor another wild night coming up.

Clay holstered his gun, turned to push through the crowd.

"How was it?" demanded a man.

"Laying for me in that alley," said Clay curtly. "His idea, and it was him or me. Any argument?"

"Hell, no! If he asked for it, then it's his rough ride."

Another in the crowd was booting the drunk to his feet. "Quit your bellerin', you souse! You're not hurt."

CLAY moved into the trading post, left the crowd to figure out its own answers. The bright fire of the moment was gone, leaving a dark grimness of spirit. For this was the very thing Katherine Casement had asked him to avoid.

Strange that he'd not thought of that at the moment. Nothing had been in his mind but the abrupt challenge and the realization that for a few brief seconds his life was going to ride on the measure of coordination of brain and hand. Well, that needed coordination had been there, and the thing was done and the future would have to find the answers. A minute later he was buying things across a counter, and the commonplace had taken over.

Could men live and die so easily and leave no greater ripple than this?

It was tough, having to go back to the Casement cabin. He knew he was expected to supper, and he knew what that meal would be like now. The cabin was brightly alight when he knocked at the door and Katherine Casement opened it.

Instantly she read his mood, and her welcoming smile faded and her eyes went wide. "Clay—what is it? You look—"

"I let you down, Kitts. I—couldn't help it. But it's done." He looked past her bright head at her father. "Reed Owen was in town. Probably been there all along, hiding out somewhere. Laying for me, so he said before the shooting started. He was backed up in the mouth of an alley. It was him or me. And—well—"

"Well," blurted Jack Casement, "I will be damned! I thought I heard some shots. Boy, he didn't wing you at all?"

"No. But he's done for. Kitts—I'm sorry. See you in the morning."

He turned and was gone again into the dark. The girl said nothing, nor moved. Jack Casement called after Clay, then swore feelingly when he got no answer. He turned to his daughter.

"What the devil was that talk about letting you down? How could he feel he was letting anybody down in wiping out a damned whelp? Girl, you didn't try and tie that boy's hands, did you?"

"Not—not the way he thought, or that you think. But all along I've had the feeling that—that something like this would come. Oh, Dad!"

Casement put an arm around her. "Whatever your fears were, they're over and done with now. Now that I think on it, this is the way Reed Owen would figure things. He'd blame Clay for uncovering his fine scheme of treachery and so want to get even. He'd know that sooner or later Clay would show up in town again, so he hid out and waited and watched and then forced the issue. And that was another and the final one of his mistakes."

Katherine did not answer. Presently she pulled away and went into the kitchen.

IN THE pearl grey light of early dawn, Clay Roswell brought the headquarters wagon to a stop at the cabin door. There was some luggage, and as soon as this was stowed they were off, the three of them on the wide seat. A mile from town

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and the desert took them over, the lingering freshness of the past night cool against their faces. To their left marched the poles and the measured sweeps of the wire. In the brightening light the desert lay still and peaceful.

"This is good—good!" exclaimed Jack Casement heartily. "There were times when I cussed the desert with its heat and its dust, but I never will again. A man has to lay in a damned bed for weeks on end to appreciate something like this."

Driving the outfit, Clay did not forget that though Jack Casement was completely out of the shadows, he still lacked much of his old time strength and vigor and that the softness of convalescence still lay in his muscles. So he drove carefully.

With the coming of the midday hours, Casement's enthusiasm and ebullience of spirit faded, and his face pulled into tired lines. Clay did not miss these signs, so he made early camp on a flat not far above the little sand valleys.

Clay went quietly about setting up camp for the night, breaking out the water barrel, unharnessing and feeding the team. Sitting cross-legged beside her father, Katherine Casement watched Clay guardedly. He was a tall man, of soft and easy movement, Indian dark from sun and wind, his expression sober and taciturn. Virtually no word at all had passed between Clay and herself throughout the day.

By the time sundown came and Clay built up a small fire, Jack Casement was sound asleep. As she began to prepare supper, Katherine said softly, "We won't disturb him. He'll be ravenous in the morning, but sleep will do him good."

They ate in the early dark, the fire's cheery light a ruddy cone. After, while Katherine took care of the dishes, Clay went around to the team again, making sure they were secure for the night. He was still fussing with them when the girl came over to him, a slim shadow in the light of the first stars. For some little time they stood silent, each powerfully conscious of the other.

WIRE IN THE WIND

Looking away from camp, down across the desert's blackness, he found it easy to feel that the whole world was empty except for the two of them. A little wind came down off the mountains and set up a small singing sound along the wire that now stretched invisible against the patient sky.

"Clay," said the girl abruptly, "I want you to know that you didn't let me down—like you said last night. When I asked you to forget Reed Owen, and not to make any try at hunting him down, I had my own reasons and they were not what you thought. When he did show up and came at you the way he did, you had no choice but to do what you did. I would never be so foolish as to hold that against you."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Kitts," Clay told her simply. "I wouldn't want you to ever hold anything against me."

"What could I hold against you," she murmured, "when I recall another night you and I put in, higher up these mountains?"

"That was a tough one," nodded Clay. "A lot of life crowded into a few hours."

"A terrible night and a wonderful one," went on the girl, almost musing. "I learned so much about myself that night."

Something in her tone drew Clay's glance. She stood with her head tipped back a little, and the starlight touched her features with faint silver.

"I wonder, Kitts, if you've thought of that night the way I have? That no two people could go through such an experience together without forever after being tied together with some strange bond?"

"I've thought of that, Clay, and marveled at the wonder of it. Perhaps now you understand why I asked you not to try and hunt down Reed Owen. I—I was afraid, so afraid that where the Goshiutes always missed, he would not. Oh, Clay!"

It seemed right and natural that with these words she should come into his arms.

In the soft drift of the wind the song of the wire seemed to take on a throbbing fullness.

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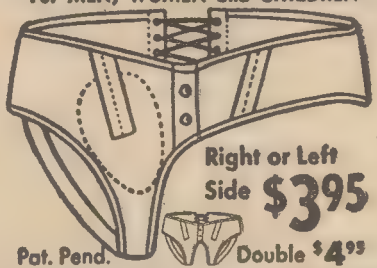

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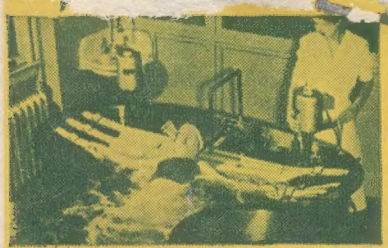

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